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THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 39 West 11th Street, New York 11, N. Y. Address communications to The Hudson Review, P.O. Box 45, Village Station, New York 14, N. Y. Subscriptions $3 per year; Canada $3.50; foreign $4. Single copy $1; in Canada $1.15. Representative in England: William Arrowsmith, The Queen's College, Oxford. Rates in England: Subscriptions £1 per year; single copy, 5 s. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. **Copyright 1949 by The Hudson Review, Inc.** **Registered U. S. Patent Office. Entered as second-class matter June 25, 1948 at the Post Office at New York, New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879.**

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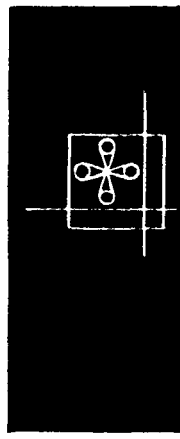

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# *Hamlet: The Analogy of Action*

*FRANCIS FERGUSSON*

THOUGH HAMLET WAS WRITTEN long before *Bérénice* or *Tristan,* modern readers are more at ease with it than the others. We may admire the masterpiece of Racine, or be genuinely "sunk" by *Tristan,* but compared with *Hamlet* they are artificial, limited, and arbitrary. Shakespeare's mysterious play has, even in our day, a directness and an intimacy which the others lack.

That is because *Hamlet* was formed in a Theatre which was close to the root of drama itself—that art which is both more primitive and more subtle than philosophy. Since the destruction of the great mirror of the Elizabethan Theatre, it has been necessary to restore or invent the theatre; and modern drama has been a succession of more limited *genres,* based upon more limited postulates about human life, like Racine's "Action as Rational," or Wagner's "Action as Passion." These sharp perspectives may seem to their own times to reveal the essence of life, but to the next generation they may appear partial or even depraved. But *Hamlet,* like *Oedipus* and the *Purgatorio,* can take myth and ritual as still alive. Its imitation of human action "undercuts" or precedes all theory. If it is "the" modern play, it is also very ancient, the heir of the great tradition in its completeness.

This view of *Hamlet* has been emerging slowly since the end of the eighteenth century. Every generation has regarded it in the light of its own taste, which was formed by the then regnant form of drama. The critics have been fascinated with it, but they have made it over in their own image: as Hamlet himself tells Ophelia, "the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now

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the time gives it proof." The beauty of *Hamlet*, its endless suggestiveness, the iridescent play of the analogical relationships within it, will no doubt continue to seduce, and then "show up" its well-intentioned lovers. But this process, as I say, has been going on for a hundred and fifty years at least; the efforts of Hamlet's critics to some extent correct each other; and in our time, with modern drama obviously dead, it may be possible to get a little closer to the play itself.

For this purpose, the first step is to become aware of certain preconceptions, certain instinctive demands which the modern theatre has taught us to make of all drama. The most common complaint made of *Hamlet* is that in spite of its vitality it is not intelligible; it is fascinating, but an artistic failure. Is this criticism based upon an understanding of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, or does it judge him on the basis of alien standards?

*Hamlet as an Artistic Failure.*

Robertson's essay on *Hamlet*[1] together with Mr. Eliot's essay,[2] which was apparently inspired by a reading of Robertson, may be taken as typical of the objection which many critics make to the play: they cannot find that it has any unity, or intellectual consistency, as a whole. Thus Robertson, while he admits that it makes a superb entertainment, and that it is full of brilliant characterization and passages of wonderful poetry, reports that it leaves the critical intellect unsatisfied. He suggests that Shakespeare may have intended nothing *more* than an entertainment, and never bothered about the deeper unity or wider meaning of the whole: "If Shakespeare could be recreated and asked why he managed here and there so oddly, he might with an unanswerable effect open eyes of wonder and ask what should make us thus put his mechanism to the rack. 'Do you want an absolute,' he might ask, 'as a stage entertainment?' . . . But the critical intellect too has its right: its concern is simply conceptual truth."

[1] *Hamlet* by J. M. Robertson.

[2] *Hamlet and His Problems* by T. S. Eliot.

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Robertson, and after him Mr. Eliot, seek in *Hamlet* conceptual truth, and do not find it. They wish to be able to reduce *Hamlet* to terms which the reason can accept; and, in the attempt to satisfy this demand, they make an interpretation of the play which certainly makes it appear confused, formless, and, in short, a failure. "Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct," Mr. Eliot writes, "in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son toward a guilty mother." He then shows that there are many elements and several entire scenes in the play which have nothing to do with the feeling of a son toward a guilty mother. He shows that on this interpretation, Hamlet himself is incomprehensible; and he concludes that Shakespeare failed to find "objective equivalents" for Hamlet's feeling: "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is *in excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point; that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem."

I am not sure that I understand Mr. Eliot's famous formula of the objective equivalent of a feeling, at least in its application to this play. Does Mr. Eliot mean that the many objects, facts, and chains of events which Shakespeare presents to make us share and understand Hamlet's feeling, do not work for us? In other words, that as we read or see the play we cannot sympathize with Hamlet's feeling? Or does he mean that we cannot understand Hamlet's psychology? Hamlet is full of feeling—much more so than Polonius, for example; but is this feeling "in excess"? One may hazard the guess that what troubles Mr. Eliot here is not that the character fails to live dramatically—his stage vitality, his fascination for many and varied audiences proves the contrary—but rather that neither he nor his author *explains* his situation in the clear and univocal terms of reason. Hamlet is *presented* directly, in his concrete and many-sided setting, in his complex situation as Prince, son, and lover. If we are to understand him,

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we must take him thus directly, and not try to simplify and reduce the picture Shakespeare offers.

The view that "the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son toward a guilty mother" is a drastic reduction of the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Hamlet's feeling toward his guilty mother is certainly essential, but not more essential than his dismay at the loss of a father. Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses* builds up an interpretation of the play on this basis, which reveals at least as much as the Eliot-Robertson interpretation. And Mr. Dover Wilson offers an explanation of Hamlet's feeling which is perhaps still more fruitful: Hamlet has lost a throne, and he has lost thereby a social, publicly-acceptable *persona:* a local habitation and a name. It is for this reason that he haunts the stage like the dispossessed of classical drama: like an Electra, who has lost the traditional life which was her due as daughter, wife and mother—or even like the ghost of Polyneikes, who cannot rest because the ritual order of society which might have provided such a place has been destroyed. And Mr. Wilson assures us that an Elizabethan audience (more or less aware of such implications as these) would have accepted the loss of the throne as sufficient explanation for Hamlet's dismay.

It is not necessary to rule out the Eliot-Robertson, or the Joycean interpretation, merely because one accepts Mr. Dover Wilson's: on the contrary, the various critics should be taken as Jamesian "reflectors," each lighting a facet of the whole from his own peculiar angle. Mr. Dover Wilson's "angle," however, has a special value, for it enables one to see beyond the plight of Hamlet as an individual to certain traditional values of society which underlie the play as a whole. And one of the chief objections to the type of criticism which Mr. Eliot brings to bear, is that it does not distinguish clearly between the story of Hamlet the individual and the story of the play as a whole. He objects to the criticism of Hamlet abstracted from the work in which he appears; but his own essay deals with "Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark"—i.e., the character without reference to the society in which he endeavors to realize himself. Hence he cannot

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understand the relevance of the minor characters, nor the significance of certain scenes which do not bear directly upon Hamlet's individual fate.

"There are unexplained scenes," he writes, "the Polonius-Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scene—for which there is little excuse." There is no explanation and no excuse for them if Shakespeare was merely trying to convey the feeling of a son toward a guilty mother. If he was also picturing the relation of a son to his father, then the whole Polonius-Laertes-Reynaldo sequence makes sense as a comic-pathetic sub-plot, with many ironic parallels to the story of Hamlet and his father's Ghost. If to this we add Mr. Dover Wilson's suggestions, we see that the welfare of Denmark—the traditional order of society, with its father-king upon whom depend "the lives of many"—is the matter of the play as a whole, rather than Hamlet's individual plight. In the welfare of Denmark, Polonius, Laertes and Reynaldo have a stake also. The postulate upon which the entire action is based (from the first scene on the parapet, with the soldiers peering through the darkness to discern what danger may threaten the body politic)—is that "the times are out of joint." It is Hamlet's misfortune that, as Prince, and as a man of profound insight, he especially should have been "born to set them right."

The Eliot-Robertson reading of *Hamlet* makes it clear that none of the characters, and none of the plots or narrative sequences, is intended to convey the meaning of the play as a whole. Nor does the play offer, even in the meditations of Hamlet, the finality of "conceptual truth" wherein the reason could find its satisfaction and its rest. This reading has the value of showing what *Hamlet* is not, rather than that of throwing light upon its actual complexity. It has also the value of summing up a sense of the theatre and of drama which has largely prevailed since the Elizabethan theatre ceased to exist. The demands and the criticism which Robertson and Eliot make would have been approved by the critics of the age of reason from Corneille to Voltaire. They are, in principle, very much like those that William Archer made in his book on Elizabethan drama, *The Old Drama*

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*and the New*. Archer demanded naturalistic psychology like that of Ibsen, and his structural principles were the rationalistic ones of the well-made play. Therefore he too found the drama of Shakespeare's theatre unsatisfying. It is our habit to insist on literal unity and conceptual truth; the value of the Eliot-Robertson reading is that it does so with such clarity as to show what we are doing. Once we understand that, the way is clear, and we may enquire whether Shakespeare was not composing on a different principle altogether.

For such an enquiry there is plenty of material available. There are studies of that characteristic device of the Elizabethans, the double plot. And there are the many recent works which show the Elizabethan theatre, not from our contemporary standpoint, but as the heir of the Middle Ages, and behind that, even of classical antiquity. In their light one can see, if not the unity of Hamlet, at least the kind of "oneness by analogy" which Shakespeare's dramaturgy aimed at.

*Hamlet as a Double or Multiple Plot.*

It has been well established by now that the Elizabethan double plot, at its best, is more than a device for resting the audience. The comic sequences which are woven through the tragedies are not to be dismissed as mere "comic relief," or as punctuation for the main story, like the music that Corneille used between the acts. In Shakespeare, and in the best of his contemporaries, the minor plots are essential parts of the whole composition. This much is, I think, generally recognized. But there is little agreement about the *nature* of these relationships: we lack a generally accepted critical vocabulary for describing them.

Thus Moulton, in his *Shakespeare the Dramatic Artist*, studied the plots themselves as intelligible chains of events, and showed (for *Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*, for example) that the various narrative strands depend causally upon each other; that their climaxes, coming together, reinforce each other; and that their dénouements are interdependent. Moulton was thinking of the objections of rationalistic critics like Robertson, and answer-

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ing them in their own terms. But Mr. William Empson, in his extremely illuminating study, *Versions of Pastoral,* is interested, not in the logical concatenation of the stories, but in the ironic parallels between them: the tragi-comic parallel between the motivations of love and war, as in *Troilus and Cressida;* between the lives of "clowns" and the lives of "heroes" in the whole tradition of British drama to the middle of the eighteenth century.

Henry James's technical concept of the "reflector" is akin to the notion of the double plot as Mr. Empson explains it. The "occasions," or the more or less peripheral intelligences which James used to mirror his action, serve to reveal it from various (ironically different) angles. Neither the author nor the protagonist is to be allowed to break down and "tell all": that would not be truly dramatic; it would not be "objective" in the Realist sense. The situation, the moral and metaphysical "scene" of the drama, is presented only as one character after another sees and reflects it; and the action of the drama as a whole is presented only as each character in turn actualizes it in his story and according to his lights. This is as much as to say that the various stories with their diverse casts of characters are *analogous,* and that the drama as a whole is therefore "one by analogy" only. It does not have the literal and rational unity of the single logically and causally-connected chain of events or story. And if we are to grasp a novel of Henry James or a play by Shakespeare, we must be prepared to follow these shifting perspectives, as we move from character to character and from story to story, trying, as we go, to divine the supreme analogue, the underlying theme, to which they all point in their various ways.

This "supreme analogue" or "underlying theme" is the main action of the play, as Aristotle explains in a neglected passage of the *Poetics.* Aristotle knew plays with a double plot-thread, one of which issues "happily," the other tragically; and he did not like them—they are "less perfect," he says, than pure tragedy; a concession to popular taste. But in his few remarks on the *Odyssey* he comes closer to describing a multiple plot as Shakespeare employed it. The *Odyssey* has neither the literal unity of the one

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cast of characters, nor the rational unity of the single plot-line. There is the story of Telemachus' search for his father, the *Telemacheia.* There is the intrigue between Penelope and the suitors. There are the many smaller stories of Odysseus' adventures on the islands and the sea; and at last his conflict with the suitors. The stories are many, but they are analogous: they are all "actualizations" of the one general action, which is the attempt "to return home." The Odyssey sets forth, in many figures, this basic action, this quest for home.

In considering the structure of *Hamlet,* all of these studies of the properties of the Double Plot are useful. The stories of the play—the struggle between Hamlet and Claudius; between Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes; between Fortinbras and Claudius' regime—are tightly woven together, causally and logically interdependent, in the manner Moulton demonstrates for *The Merchant of Venice.* At the same time the various stories are presented as ironically parallel in the ways Mr. Empson describes. Polonius, for instance, plays the "clown" to Hamlet's "hero," to use Mr. Empson's words; at the same time Hamlet frequently feels himself in the role of clown in relation to Fortinbras, and even Laertes. Or, taking Henry James's phrase, you may put it that we are continually shifting from reflector to reflector throughout the play: from the simple soldiers of scene 1 to the smoothly hypocritical Claudius of scene 2; from the myopic shrewdness of Polonius, to the troubled but profound intuitions of Ophelia. The action is illumined from so many angles that we have an embarrassment of riches; the problem is not to demonstrate that the play moves in ironic parallels, but rather to show that they add up to something—are intended to convey (with however rich a profusion) an underlying unity of theme. For this purpose Aristotle's notion of analogous actions is the most useful.

The main action of Hamlet may be described as the attempt to find and destroy the hidden "imposthume" which is poisoning the life of Claudius' Denmark. All of the characters—from Polonius with his "windlasses" and "assays of bias," to Hamlet

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with his parables and symbolic shows—realize this action, in comic, or evil, or inspired ways. And the organic parts of the plot—the movement of the play as a whole—show forth the beginning, middle and end of this action according to the traditional scheme.

*The Prologue* includes approximately the first three scenes of Act. I. Act I, Scene 1 (the Parapet) makes the simplest and most general statement of the main theme or action of the play. The soldiers, in the cold and darkness of the night, are watching for the hidden danger (the physical or metaphysical malady) which may threaten the present Danish regime. Is it war—and thus connected with young Fortinbras in neighboring Norway? Or something less natural, and thus connected with Hamlet's father's ghost, who appears but will not speak? The soldiers' peering-through-the-dark constitutes a sort of overture, in sensuous terms, to their speculations about the Ghost and his meanings.

Act I, scene 2 (Claudius' Court) restates the main theme, this time from the point of view of Claudius and his regime. What possible ill is threatening his rule? His marriage to Gertrude on the heels of the death of Hamlet's father has been accepted by all, so *that* cannot be the danger. But three young men, unaccountable quantities, all with the restlessness of youth, are potential sources of trouble. Fortinbras, who wishes to avenge his father for the loss of lands to Denmark, is threatening war in nearby Norway. Laertes is asking his father, Polonius, for permission to travel; and Hamlet, in black, moody, seems not to have accepted Claudius' regime with a good grace—perhaps because of the loss of *his* father. Claudius deals with Fortinbras through his uncle, the present King of Norway; satisfies Laertes by giving permission for the traditional fling in Paris; but fails to appease Hamlet, who thus begins to appear to him as the most dangerous center of infection. When Claudius departs, with his glittering court, and Hamlet, in his solemn black, is left alone onstage, we get his sharply different version of Denmark's trouble: "Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely." And then, when Horatio and the soldiers come to report the Ghost, we are led to connect

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this apparition with Hamlet's sense that the body politic is sick.

Act I, scene 3 (Polonius' house) is a comic variation on the main theme. Laertes is warning his sister Ophelia about the dangers of youth, particularly Hamlet's youth—for Laertes, with his simple-minded conventionality, instinctively thinks of Hamlet as the source of infection, much as Claudius does, though for less specific reasons. When Polonius appears, he gives Laertes the same advice that Laertes had given Ophelia. We see that Laertes is a chip off the old block; and that for this family there is no hidden malady which ordinary prudence and the experience of the aged cannot find and cure. But Ophelia, with her love for Hamlet, throws doubt on Polonius' simple diagnosis.

(Ophelia, like Gertrude, has great symbolic value in the economy of the play as a whole. Both women base their very beings upon their men; and both of them are attached at once to Hamlet and to Claudius' regime. Thus they are at once touching reminders of what might have been—the unity and health of the whole state—and victims of its actual illness and disunity.)

*The Agons,* or conflicts of the play, are developed in scenes 4 and 5 of Act I, in Act II, and in the first scene of Act III. It is established that all of the characters are seeking to identify and to destroy the actual or potential malady of Claudius' Denmark; but they interpret it differently, and hence conflicts and contrasts develop between their various lines of action. Because the "malady" is so mysterious, and because it would be perilous to trouble the smooth surface of Claudius' regime, the characters all act secretly, indirectly, and in mutual mistrust. Hamlet does not even trust the Ghost; he cannot tell whether it is a "spirit of health or goblin damned"; and thus there is contrast and conflict even in this relationship. Polonius is endeavoring to serve Claudius' regime; but Claudius does not trust Polonius' diagnosis of the trouble; he summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a check. Thus the struggles which develop in this part of the play are all struggles in the dark, as though the antagonists, waiting and listening, could not find each other, and fought only briefly and desperately when they happened to bump together.

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But by the first scenes of Act III the main lines of the many-sided conflict which the Prologue prepared are visible. Claudius, having satisfied Laertes with his trip to Paris, and having diverted the dutiful Fortinbras from Denmark to Poland, has decided that Hamlet is the source of his dis-ease, and must be rendered harmless. Polonius agrees with him, and is now beginning to feel a little out of his depth: he is no longer sure that Hamlet's malady is merely thwarted love for Ophelia. As for Hamlet, he sees Claudius as the chief plague-spot, and his main antagonist, though, at the same time, the spreading disease has vitiated his every relationship.

I have said that the Agon shows conflicts *and contrasts.* The contrasts between the visions and the lines of action of the various characters are more important than their overt struggles, and reveal far more about the real malady of Denmark and the attempt to find and destroy it. These *contrasts* are brought out by the order of the scenes, as we shift from comic to tragic versions of the main action. This may be illustrated by considering the alternation of the Polonius story and the Hamlet story in Acts I and II—the scenes for which Mr. Eliot says there is no explanation or excuse.

The last scene of the prologue, Polonius' house (Act I, scene 3) is at once a comic version of the opening statement of the main action, and the prologue to the story of Polonius and Laertes which is closely analogous in many respects to the story of Hamlet's "father" (The Ghost *and* Claudius) and Hamlet. The clownish and comic father-son relationship of Polonius and Laertes throws ironic lights upon the tragic relationship of Hamlet to his anomalous parent. Thus as soon as we have seen Polonius attempting to guide and advise Laertes in preparation for his trip to Paris, we are shifted to the dark parapet, with Hamlet awaiting word from his Ghost-father, and hearing, below, the roaring and the booming which Claudius, his other "father," is making at his drunken celebration. The Ghost appears, and speaks to Hamlet; but, from the other side of the grave, he can convey little to his son—and that only in hints and metaphors. He is

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definite enough about the fact that Claudius killed him; but Hamlet does not know what to make even of that:

*O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?*
*And shall I couple hell? O fie!*

After this we return to Polonius who is sending Reynaldo to Paris to watch over Laertes. It is another father trying to reach and guide his son—who is not on the other side of the grave, this time, but on the other side of the channel; yet as absurdly remote as Hamlet from the Ghost. We can be sure that when Reynaldo gets to Paris, and tries to apply to Laertes the "bait of falsehood," the "indirections" and "windlasses and essays of bias" which father Polonius devised to reach him, Laertes will also reply "O fie!"

Thus these three scenes are closely parallel, yet sharply contrasted: the divided world of Polonius-Laertes is incommensurable with the divided world of the Ghost-Hamlet; and this incommensurability is deeper than any overt conflict, and shows more about Hamlet's problems and the true malady of Denmark, than any fact, or any explicit issue, could do. And when Ophelia appears on Reynaldo's exit, torn and frightened by her sight of Hamlet, we have before us the most pathetic victim of this division within the sick society; and with this vision, the Hamlet-Ghost, Laertes-Polonius sequence ends.

*The Climax, Peripety and Recognition* are presented in Act III, scenes 2, 3 and 4—the Players' Scene, and the two scenes following. In the first of these (scene 3) Claudius, convicted of the crime, attempts to pray, and Hamlet rejects his chance to kill him. In the next (scene 4) Hamlet faces his mother with her guilt, and inadvertently kills Polonius.

Hamlet's presentation of his play to the Danish Court is both a direct attack on Claudius, as his chief antagonist, and an attempt to resolve the deeper "contrasts," the divided counsels, the incommensurable visions, which constitute the malady of Denmark—or at least its chief symptom. By hinting broadly at Claudius' crime Hamlet, of course, shakes Claudius' whole position, for that depends upon concealment. At the same time he convicts

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all of the supporters of the regime, even including Ophelia and Gertrude, of a share in the guilt.—But the further meanings of Hamlet's play are considered at more length below. At this point I merely wish to point out that the presentation of the play is the Peripety: it puts the King and his regime on the defensive, and justifies the most hidden intuitions of Hamlet, and the most secret messages of the Ghost. The two scenes following the Players' Scene merely drive home its effects: Claudius becomes in his own eyes an outlaw; Gertrude's heart is "cleft in twain" and, as a sort of absurd and pathetic parenthesis, Polonius is destroyed. The "hidden imposthume," in all its ramifications, is opened; and from this point the action, beyond anyone's control, runs down to its fated end.

*The Pathos and/or Sparagmos* coincides with Act IV. Both the state and the individuals that compose it "suffer" the results of Hamlet's opening the "hidden imposthume." Laertes, hearing of his father's death, comes back to avenge him, and starts a rebellion; and the scenes which show this overt social disorder alternate with Ophelia's mad scenes: "Schism in the State and Schism in the soul," in Toynbee's phrase. Meanwhile Hamlet, on his trip to England and his return, and Fortinbras, at the head of his troops, approach for the kill. The King (who conceals Hamlet's murder of Polonius, minimizes Ophelia's tragedy, and corrupts Laertes' demand for justice) is trying to "skin and film the ulcerous place." But his efforts do not re-establish his regime; they make at most a horrible simulacrum of a healthy state; smooth on the surface, but dead within.

*The Epiphany or Collective Revelation* is shown in Act V. It is Shakespeare's habit to wind up his complicated plots at the very end; and the big killings do not occur until the last scene. But these sensational events tell us little that is new; they seem to be only minor corollaries of the great peripety in Act III. The substance of Act V is chiefly what Hamlet, the "chief reflector," *sees*, when he returns, spent, nervously exhausted, but clear-eyed, from England. He sees the fatal illness of Denmark: the literal bones in the graveyard; the many details of social disorder (the

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Prince, for instance, on a level with the grave-digging clowns); the "maimèd rite" of Ophelia's funeral, and the death-trap of Claudius' last court assembled for his duel with Laertes. The widespread malady of Denmark is clear at last; and with the end of Claudius and his regime it is gone like a bad dream. Fortinbras appears at last in Denmark: a new hope for a new, purged state.

The purpose of this sketch, of course, is not to exhaust the analogical relationships among the narrative strands in *Hamlet,* but only to suggest, by means of a few illustrations, that they are there, and that they are an all-important element in the structure of the play. They point, I think, in general, to the main action, and to the concern for the welfare of Denmark which all the characters share. But Ernest Jones has an interpretation of *Hamlet,* also based upon analogies between the stories that compose it, which reduces the play to a vast and only half-conscious elaboration of the motivations of the Oedipus Complex: "The main theme of this story," he writes, "is a highly elaborated and disguised account of a boy's love for his mother and consequent jealousy of and hatred for his father."

I have no doubt that these variations on the parent-child theme are there. Shakespeare seems to have missed none of the tensions, none of the ambivalence, in this crucial relationship, and Jones's study confirms, in general, the thesis I am proposing about Shakespeare's principles of composition: that he expounds his theme through many analogies which ironically illuminate and modify each other. But one cannot reduce the whole play to this motivation. The analogous stories, situations, and relationships in *Hamlet,* though they include the feelings associated with the Oedipus Complex, point to the main action of the play as a whole, which is based upon the objective situation in Denmark. The disease which is killing that state is not to be explained in purely psychological terms. The religious, cultural and moral values of the tradition are at stake in the action, and the play as a whole has dimensions which cannot be completely understood if one thinks of it in these psychological terms, in abstraction from the Theatre in which it was formed.

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A study of the interwoven plots of *Hamlet* points to the underlying theme, the main action of the play as a whole. But it does not quite enable us to understand Hamlet's shifting motives; and it does not throw much light upon the rhythms, the spectacular effects, and the rise and fall of tension, in the play considered as a *performance* before an audience. If we are to come a little closer to the play as play, it is necessary to consider the whole Idea of the Theatre which Shakespeare used and assumed in his audience; for this Theatre offered means of "imitating the action" which cannot be subsumed under the art of plot-making as it is generally understood.

*Hamlet as Ritual and Improvisation.*

If one could see a performance of *Hamlet,* uncut, unbroken by intermissions, and employing the kind of simple make-believe which Shakespeare, with his bare stage, must have intended, we should find much to enthrall us besides the stories themselves. The stories, of course, start at once, and are felt continuously as working themselves out: fate, behind the scenes, makes, from time to time, its sudden pronouncements. But onstage, the music and the drums and the marching of royal and military pageantry, are directly absorbing, and they assure us that something of great and general significance is going on. From time to time the stage is emptied; the pageantry is gone; the stories seem to be marking time—and Hamlet emerges, alone, or with one or two interlocutors. Sometimes he suffers his visions before us; sometimes he makes jokes and topical allusions; sometimes he spars with his interlocutors like the gag-man in a minstrel show, or the master of ceremonies in a modern musical.

The scenes of pageantry are all civic or military or religious rituals; the changing of the guard, the formal assembling of the Court of Denmark; the funeral of Ophelia. Though they all have their relevance to the interwoven stories of the play, and to the discordant purposes of the various characters, their chief function is to show forth the main action, or underlying theme of the play, at various stages in its development. At these

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ritual moments the plot-lines are, as it were, gathered together, the issues are held in suspension, and we are reminded of the traditional social values in which all have some sort of stake.

Hamlet's monologues, and his nimble exchanges with Polonius or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; his "topical allusions" to drunkenness or to the state of the theatre, make a very different kind of theatrical appeal. He steps out of the narrative course of the play, out of the "world of Denmark" which is the basic postulate of the make-believe, refers directly to the parallels between "Denmark" and the England of his audience. From one point of view Shakespeare seems to be counting on the inherent dramatic and theatrical interest which this character has apart from the story—permitting him, like the first violin in a concerto, a cadenza on his own, after which we are returned to the matter in hand. From another point of view, Hamlet's "improvised" moments are carried by our confidence in him as "chief reflector": we look to him, as to the ritual scenes, to show us the underlying theme of the whole.

Both the Ritual and the Improvisational elements in *Hamlet* are essential—as essential as the stories—in the structure of the whole. The Elizabethan Theatre, at once as frankly "theatrical" as vaudeville, and as central to the life of its time as an ancient rite, offered Shakespeare two resources, two theatrical "dimensions" which the modern naturalistic tradition of serious drama must try, or pretend, to do without. In the accompanying table I have shown the chief Ritual and the chief Improvisational scenes in relation to the main parts of the Plot.

If one thinks over the succession of ritual scenes as they appear in the play, it is clear that they serve to focus attention on the Danish body politic and its hidden malady: they are ceremonious invocations of the well-being of society, and secular or religious devices for securing it. As the play progresses, the rituals change in character, from the dim but honest changing of the guard, through Ophelia's mock rites, to the black mass of Claudius' last court. And it appears that the improvisational scenes bear a significant and developing relationship to the rituals.

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| *The Parts of the Plot* | *Ritual Scenes* | *Improvisational Entertainment* |
|---|---|---|
| The Prologue | Act I, sc. 1<br>The Changing of the Guard.<br>Act I, sc. 2<br>Claudius' First Court. | |
| The Agons—Development of conflicting purposes of various characters; contrasts of their stories; "purposes mistook"; indecision and fighting in the dark. | | Act I, sc. 4<br>Hamlet's sermon on drunkenness (in Denmark and/or England).<br>Act II, sc. 2<br>Hamlet exchanges wisecracks with Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the players.<br>Act III, sc. 2<br>Hamlet's charge to the players—his opinions on the art of acting. |
| The Climax, Peripety, and Recognition; all narrative strands brought together. | *Ritual and Entertainment*<br>Act III, sc. 2<br>The Performance of Hamlet's play is both rite and entertainment, and shows the Prince as at once clown and ritual head of the state. | |
| The Pathos or "sparagmos," both of the state and the individuals, leading to epiphany or "collective revelation" of the general disease. (Cf. Toynbee's "schism in the State and schism in the soul"). | Act IV, sc. 5<br>Ophelia's Madness is a mock ritual, a mixture of false and lewd marriage, and false and savage funeral; refers also to the funeral of Hamlet's father and Gertrude's false marriage. Alternates with rebellion in the state. | |
| The Epiphany, or Final Vision of the underlying truth of the action. | Act V, sc. 1<br>Ophelia's funeral. A "maimèd rite" but a real death.<br>Act V, sc. 2<br>The duel between Hamlet and Laertes. This duel is surrounded with all the ceremonies of Claudius' Court, like the Players' Scene, and Claudius' other loud and drunken celebrations; but every element in it is false or mistaken: a mockery of invocation; and it eventuates in death, and "resurrection" in the shape of Fortinbras, who, now that Claudius' regime is gone, can appear with his new faith and hope. | Act V<br>Hamlet jokes and moralizes with the Gravedigger and Horatio. He feels like the gag-man and the royal victim in one. Gravedigger corresponds to Polonius. |

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In general, they throw doubt upon the efficacy of the official magic, as when Hamlet refuses to take Claudius' first court at its face value; yet even the most cutting ironies of Hamlet do not disavow the mystery which the rituals celebrate, or reject the purposes that inform them.

The rituals, the stories, and the improvisations together make the peculiar rhythm of *Hamlet* as a performance. Denmark is shown as waiting, as it were in the darkness of its ineffective ceremonies and hollow communal prayers, while the infection, "mining all within," divides every man in secret from every other, and bursts forth, from time to time, in savage but brief and ineffective fights.

But before examining the sequence of rituals, with its center in the Players' Scene, it is necessary to endeavor to support the view that the Elizabethan Theatre had, in fact, this ritual aspect: that Shakespeare's audience, like Sophocles', was prepared to accept his play, not only as an exciting story, but as the "celebration of the mystery" of human life.

*The Globe Theatre and the Festival of Dionysos.*

The main evidence (apart from the play itself) for taking *Hamlet* as a species of Ritual Drama, is provided by recent studies which show that a great deal of the religious culture of the Middle Ages was still alive in Shakespeare's time. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture,* for example, makes this clear. Mr. Tillyard quotes Hamlet's famous speech on man: "What a piece of work is man: how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."—"This has been taken," Mr. Tillyard explains, "as one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism, an assertion of the dignity of man against the asceticisms of medieval misanthropy. Actually it is in the purest medieval tradition: Shakespeare's version of the orthodox encomia of what man, created in God's image, was like in his prelapsarian state and of what ideally he is still capable of being. It also shows Shake-

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speare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts. It is what the theologians had been saying for centuries." And Mr. Tillyard proceeds to show that most of the "world picture which the Middle Ages inherited" was still tacitly assumed by the Elizabethans: "an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies but modified by man's sin and the hope of his redemption."

The Elizabethan Stage itself, that central mirror of the life of its times, was a symbolic representation of this traditional cosmos: it was thus taken both as the physical and as the metaphysical "scene" of man's life. Mr. Kernodle has shown this in detail in his illuminating study, *From Art to Theatre*. He traces the genealogy of the symbolic façade of the Elizabethan stage house back through street pageantry to painting and architecture of tombs and altars; and thence to the arcade screen of the Greek Tragic Theatre itself. "More than an arrangement of side doors and inner and upper stages, that façade was itself a symbol of castle, throne, triumphal arch, altar, tomb"—in short, an all-purpose, eminently practicable setting, implying the constant elements in the Elizabethan World Picture, yet flexible enough to serve the shifting make-believe of the actors. Over the whole was a permanent canopy, painted to represent the heavens, a vault literally "fretted with golden fire."

The symbolic character of this stage seems to imply a conception of the theatre akin to that of ritual: the celebration of the mystery of human life. This stage and its drama did not, it is true, develop directly from the Mass; it developed from the secular theatre of the Middle Ages, and, as Mr. Kernodle shows, from Royal and civic pageantry. But in the Renaissance the monarchy and its rites was taking over some of the religious significance of the Church and *its* rites. The Pope tended to be superseded by the Prince as Vicar, or "type" of Christ, the pageantry and ceremony of the Church by the pageantry and ceremony of the national State. The Tudor monarch was the symbol, and the visible center of the traditional world order, so that Donne could write, on the death of Prince Henry:

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*Of Weight one Centre, one of Greatness is,*
*And Both my Centres feel this Period.*

The role of the monarch in Shakespeare's time (and in his plays) was thus very close to that of Sophocles' Oedipus or Creon: he was at once ruler, high priest, and father of the community. And the ceremonies which Shakespeare and Hamlet's Danes engaged in—whether obviously religious, like the funerals, or more secular, like the Courts—were taken as celebrating and securing the welfare of the whole, of the monarchy, and of the "lives of man" that depended on it.

The Elizabethan Theatre may thus be regarded as the heir of the Greek Tragic Theatre, with its ritual basis. The Elizabethan cosmos is still that of the great tradition, which the Middle Ages inherited from the City State. The physical stage itself is symbolic in the same way as the Tragic Stage of the Greeks; and the ritual component in its drama has similar deep and general meanings.

This does not mean, of course, that Shakespeare's audience, or even Shakespeare himself, could have expounded this genealogy and these parallels. If the tradition was alive in Shakespeare's time, it was as a "habit of thought and feeling" rather than as an explicit and integrated philosophy. But Shakespeare seems to have felt the essential elements of this great "Theatre" as alive still; to have assumed that his audience would respond to them, and to have based his dramaturgy upon them.

If Shakespeare's Theatre is thus akin to Sophocles', their drama should be composed on similar principles: appealing in both cases to ancient and publicly accepted values and modes of understanding, rather than preaching, inventing and arguing in the manner of modern drama. And the comparison should throw some light on both.

The themes of *Oedipus* are, from many points of view, strikingly similar to those of *Hamlet*. Oedipus gave his name to that "Complex" to which Ernest Jones reduces *Hamlet*. Whatever one may think of this reduction, it is clear that in both plays a royal sufferer is associated with pollution, in its very sources, of an en-

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tire social order. Both plays open with an invocation of the well-being of the endangered body politic. In both the destiny of the individual and of society are closely intertwined; and in both the suffering of the royal victim seems to be necessary before purgation and renewal can be achieved.

But my purpose here is not to attempt an extended comparison of the two plays; it is, rather, to contrast the structural principles of these two ritual dramas, one from the beginnings of the tradition, the other from the end, at the very brink of the modern world.

The extraordinary unity and clarity of *Oedipus,* in comparison with *Hamlet,* is perhaps due to the fact that it is closer to the form, purpose, and occasion (the festival of Dionysos) of its ritual source, than *Hamlet,* in the Globe Theatre, is to *its* ritual sources. Oedipus is the one and obvious Protagonist, his story the literal subject of the play. He is the diagrammatic royal scapegoat, a marked man, from the first. And the parts of the play, which show the stages of his destruction, correspond very closely to the stages of the ancient ritual sacrifice.

In *Hamlet* it is as though every one of these elements had been elaborated by a process of critical analysis. Hamlet himself, though a Prince, is without a throne; though a sufferer for the truth, he can appear in public as a mere infatuated or whimsical youth. We have seen how many ironic parallels Shakespeare provides to his story—and to this I may add that it takes both Hamlet and Claudius to represent the Royal Victim of the tradition. Though the play has the general shape of the Tragic Rhythm, and the traditional parts of the Plot, each part is presented in several ironically analogous versions. The Prologue is in three scenes of contrasting moods. The Agon is so complicated that the very purposes of the antagonists are critically seen as false, hidden, or "mistook." It takes all of Act V to represent the Epiphany, the final vision of death, from all the angles that Shakespeare knows.

Even the ritual process itself is, in *Hamlet,* directly dramatized: i.e., presented in a tragic, ironic light. There are no rituals in

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*Oedipus*: *Oedipus is* a ritual. But *Hamlet* has an extremely modern and sceptical, a Pirandellesque, theatricality as well; Shakespeare plays with the basis of his own make-believe. Sophocles uses the Tragic Theatre with its ritual basis to mirror human life directly. Shakespeare uses the Elizabethan Theatre in the same way; but at the same time he has another mirror—his own and Hamlet's supermodern awareness—in which the making of the ritual is itself ironically reflected.

*Oedipus* moves, as it were, straight to its end, in clear figures of the Tragic Rhythm. But in *Hamlet* there is also a movement of ironic analysis, represented by the analogous versions of the main theme which the interwoven plots embody, and by Hamlet's monologues and wry jokes: improvisations which are *beside* the story of the play, in closer relationship to the audience. But though Shakespeare thus sees the ritual order of Claudius' Denmark as it were from *without,* he does not, like Euripides, simply satirize the values and the order of the traditional religion: the movement of analysis is connected from time to time by a synthesis (a funeral or a Court scene) in which the main theme of the play, and the interdependence of all the dramatis personae is reaffirmed. These rituals in *Hamlet* are not simply absurd, as a Euripidean *deus ex machina* is absurd; they are rather tragic failures, like Claudius' private attempt to pray: "Words without thoughts never to heaven go." In spite of the ironic device of the double plot, and the deeper irony of the Pirandellesque improvisation (Is all the world a stage or the stage life itself?) Shakespeare also clings to the conception of the Theatre as Ritual.

*Ritual and Improvisation: Hamlet's Play as the Center.*

Shakespeare's Theatre, because of its ancient roots and its central place in society, permitted the development of ritual drama —or at least a drama which had this dimension as well as others. In the structure of *Hamlet* the rituals, as distinguished from the plots, serve to present the *main* action at various points in its development. Shakespeare uses them in much the same way in which Henry James used his "social occasions" to present the

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main theme of *The Awkward Age*. The structure of *Hamlet* could be described in Henry James's words: "A circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light up with all due intensity one of its aspects. . . . I revelled in this notion of the Occasion as a thing by itself." That is the important point: the social rite or occasion is taken as a thing by itself; it enables the author to assemble his dramatis personae in a wider light than any of their individual intelligences could provide. If my analysis of *Hamlet* is correct, the rituals (though they have deeper meanings than James's social gatherings) are also "occasions" of this kind: lamps lighting the rottenness of Denmark (the basic situation of the play) and the many-sided action which results, at various points in its course, and in various aspects.

In the table showing the relation of the Plot to the Ritual scenes and the Improvisations, the Players' Scene is at the center. It has a ritual aspect, it is Hamlet's most ambitious improvisation, and it is the climax and peripety of the whole complex plot-scheme. If one can understand this scene, one will be close to grasping Shakespeare's sense of the Theatre, and his direct, profoundly histrionic dramaturgy.

The prologue contains two rituals, the changing of the guard and Claudius' first court. The changing of the guard is conducted by the honest and simple-minded soldiers, in perfect good faith: the welfare of the state is conceived in the most obvious and acceptable terms, and with the solemnity and authority of the military function. The motives of the soldiers are not impugned; and the only ironic angle we get on this scene is due to the arrival of the ghost, which clearly suggests that the military rite is not an appropriate means for dealing with the actual danger. Claudius' court, on the other hand, is conducted by the new King; and here we feel (both in the light of Hamlet's disabused view of Claudius, and in the light of the visit of the Ghost) that there

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is something false about Claudius' discharge of the royal function. Together the two scenes establish the fact of danger, and the common concern with the threatened welfare of the state. But they throw ironic lights upon each other. The point of view of the regime is in conflict with that of the simple soldiers. Neither the soldiers nor the regime have the magic for dealing with the Ghost; and it appears that the rituals of the state in general are false or mistaken.

The many conflicts which the prologue presents as it were in suspension, are further developed (though without coming to direct issue) during the rest of the first act, the second act, and the first scene of Act III. Then (bringing the climax, peripety and recognition) comes Hamlet's improvised ritual, the players' scene. Hamlet, as the "chief reflector," the widest consciousness in literature, as Henry James called him, is aware of what the soldiers see; of what Claudius sees, and of what the ghost sees, and he is torn by all the conflicts implicit in these partial values and myopic vested interests. His "ritual occasion" is thus an answer to both rituals in the prologue; and at the same time (because he has also seen what the ghost sees) it is an answer to, and a substitute for, the inadequate or false ritual order of Denmark. It is itself a "ritual" in that it assembles the whole tribe for an act symbolic of their deepest welfare; it is false and ineffective, like the other public occasions, in that the Danes do not really understand or intend the enactment which they witness. It is, on the other hand, not a true ritual, but an improvisation—for here the role of Hamlet, as showman, as master of ceremonies, as clown, as night-club entertainer who lewdly jokes with the embarrassed patrons—Hamlet the ironist, in sharpest contact with the audience onstage and the audience offstage, yet a bit outside the literal belief in the story: it is here that this aspect of Hamlet's role is clearest. But notice that, if Hamlet is the joking clown, he is also like those improvising Old Testament prophets, who, gathering a handful of dust or of little bones, or a damaged pot from the potter's wheel, present to a blind generation a sudden image of their state. It is in the players' scene that the peculiar

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theatricality of *Hamlet*—ritual as theatre, and theatre as ritual; at once the lightest improvisation and the solemnest Occasion—is most clearly visible.

What, then, is the image, the parable, the "fear in a handful of dust," which Hamlet thus places,—with all the pomp of court and all the impudence of the night-club entertainer—in the very center of the public consciousness of Denmark?

The most detailed analysis I know of the Players' Scene is that of Mr. Dover Wilson, in his excellent book, *What Happens in Hamlet*. The reader is referred to that study, and to its companion-piece, Granville-Barker's book on *Hamlet*, for a discussion of the theatrical problems which the scene presents and for an understanding of the complexity of the scene as a whole, wherein the focus of the audience's attention is shifted from Hamlet (the "central reflector") to Horatio, to the Queen, to Ophelia, to the King—as though the play-within-a-play were being lighted from many angles by reflection from many mirrors. My purpose here is only to describe Hamlet's play itself, in order to show how it reveals the malady of the regime in all its ambiguity, mystery, and spreading ramifications. For this little play is indeed an all-purpose mousetrap—and it catches more than the conscience of the King.

First of all the play presents the hidden crime (the murder of a King and the more or less incestuous theft of his Queen and his throne) upon which, as in *Oedipus*, all the threads of the interwoven plots depend. It is the presentation of this literal fact which has the immediate effect upon the innocent bystanders of the court, and upon the innocent groundlings in the audience; though in Hamlet's violent view none are innocent. Because the society of the regime and the purposes of its supporters depend either upon ignorance or concealment, the public representation of the crime is itself an act of aggression, Hamlet's attack, the turning point in the story. This attack reaches the guilty Claudius first, Gertrude second, Polonius third; then Laertes and Ophelia. And at length it clears the way for Fortinbras, the new faith and the new regime.

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But though the fact of murder, incest and usurpation is clearly presented, the *time* of the murder—is it still to come?—is vague, and the dramatis personae in the playlet are shifted about in such a way as to leave the identity of the criminal in question, and so to spread the guilt. The actual crime was that of Claudius; but in the play the guilty one is *nephew* to the King. This could mean (as Polonius and Gertrude seem to think) a direct threat by Hamlet to Claudius; it also means that Hamlet (who had admitted to himself a "weakness and melancholy" which makes him subject to devilish solicitations, and who had assured Ophelia that "I am myself indifferent honest, yet I could accuse me of such things it were better my mother had not borne me")—had granted Claudius, in advance, that he too is at least potentially guilty. Neither Hamlet nor Shakespeare seem to rule out a Freudian interpretation of the tangle; Hamlet comes close to representing himself as the diagrammatic son of the Oedipus complex, killing the father and possessing the mother. Yet his awareness of such motivations lifts the problems from the level of pathology to that of drama; he sees himself, Claudius, Denmark, the race itself, as subject to greeds and lusts which the hypocritical façade of the regime guiltily conceals.

Thus the literal meaning of the playlet is the fact of the crime; but the trope and the anagoge convey a picture of the human in general as weak, guilty and foolish: the deepest and most sinister version of the malady of Claudius' regime in Denmark. This picture should emerge directly from the staging of the playlet before the corrupt and hypocritical court, under the inspired and triumphant irony of the regisseur-prince. The whining of pipes, the parade of mummers, the wooden gestures of the dumb-show, the tinkle of the rhymes, should have the magical solemnity of a play-party or children's singing-game ("London bridge is falling down"). Yet because of the crimes represented, this atmosphere is felt as unbearably weak and frivolous, a parody of all solemn rites. If this playlet invokes the magic potency of the theatre ("the play's the thing") it does so with as much despairing irony as love. The staging is crude and childish: Hamlet's actors vainly

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take things into their own hands, and the court audience is condescendingly unperceptive (until the scandal dawns on them) as any cynical crowd at a Broadway opening.

Hamlet's audience onstage (and perhaps offstage as well) misses the deeper meanings of his play. Yet he and his author have put it as simply as possible in the weary couplets of the Player-King. The Player-King seems to stand for Hamlet's father; and thus for the Ghost, and he speaks in fact with the clarity but helplessness (in this world) of the dead—addressing the frivolous Player-Queen without much hope of understanding. Since he is Hamlet's puppet, he speaks also for Hamlet, and since he is the King, he stands also for Claudius. Claudius, in the course of the play, will gradually acquire a helplessness like that of the Ghost; a faithlessness and an indecision like that of Hamlet. It is the function of the Player-King to state as directly as possible that gloomy and fatalistic sense of human action which is the subject of the play, and which all the various characters have by analogy.

The way to show this in detail would be to study the action of each character, and to show what frivolity and gloomy faithlessness they have in common, but this would take too long. The point may be briefly illustrated by juxtaposing a few utterances of Hamlet and Claudius with analogous couplets of the Player-King:

| | |
|---|---|
| Hamlet: Act V sc. 2 | *There's a divinity that shapes our ends,*<br>*Rough-hew them how we will.* |
| | *Wasn't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet:*<br>. . . . . .<br>. . . . . *Hamlet denies it.*<br>*Who does it then? His madness.* |
| Claudius: Act III sc. 3 | *My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;*<br>*And, like a man to double business bound,*<br>*I stand in pause where I shall first begin,*<br>*And both neglect.* |
| Act IV sc. 7 | *Not that I think you did not love your father,*<br>*But that I know love is begun by time,*<br>*And that I see, in passages of proof,*<br>*Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.*<br>*There lives within the very flame of love*<br>*A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,* |

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*And nothing is at a like goodness still,*
*For goodness, growing to a plurisy,*
*Dies in his own too-much. That we would do,*
*We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes*
*And hath abatements and delays as many*
*As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents;*
*And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh,*
*That hurts by easing.*

Player-King: *Our wills and fates do so contrary run*
*That our devices still are overthrown,*
*Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.*

*What to ourselves in passion we propose,*
*The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.*

*Purpose is but the slave to memory*
*Of violent birth, but poor validity.*

The speeches of Hamlet and Claudius which I have quoted come late in the play, when both of them gain a deathly insight into their *destinos*—the hidden and uncontrolled springs of their own and others' actions. Even Claudius sees so deeply at this moment that he gets the sense of human action which all the characters have by analogy. His speech to Laertes (Act IV, sc. 7) is, moreover, both made more ironic and more general by being addressed to Laertes, in order to *deceive* him into a course which is contrary to his deepest purposes and best interests. As for Hamlet, his sense of Pathos, of the suffering of motivations beyond our understanding or control, does not save him from violent outbursts any more than Claudius' does. Shakespeare usually grants his victims a moment of great clarity when it is too late—and then shows them returning, like automatons, to "ravin down their proper bane" and die.

But the chief point I wish to make here is that the Player-King presents very pithily the basic vision of human action in the play, at a level so deep that it applies to all the characters: the guilty, the free, the principals, the bystanders, those in power and the dispossessed. This vision of course comes directly from the crime of Claudius and the other "accidental judgments, casual slaughters, purposes mistook" (as Horatio describes them when sum-

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ming up for Fortinbras) upon which the complicated plot depends; yet this generalized vision is more terrible than any of the particular crimes, and much more important for understanding Hamlet's motivation. To this point I shall return later.

The immediate effect of Hamlet's play comes by way of the concrete scandal, which brings the climax and peripety of the narratives. The presentation of the play is Hamlet's attack; it succeeds; it convicts Claudius' regime and "the lives of many" that depend upon it of impotence and corruption. After that revelation all is lost (just as Macbeth is lost after the Banquet scene)—and the desperate devices of the King and Laertes, the brief folly of Polonius, and the unimpeded progress of Fortinbras, in the healthy rhythm of the march, are seen as clearly fated or doomed.

For this reason also the "rituals" which follow the players' scene have a different quality from those which precede it. Since the regime has lost its manna—been "shown up"—the rituals in Acts IV and V, marking the stages of the collective pathos and epiphany, are clearly presented as mad or evil. Ophelia's mad ritual presents the "sparagmos" or tearing asunder of the individual and society at once ("schism in the state and schism in the soul"), mingling marriage and funeral, lewdness and prettiness, love and destruction to the accompaniment of plotting and rebellion. Ophelia's funeral is a real death but a "maimèd rite"; the duel between Hamlet and Laertes is ostensibly a ritual and actually a murder. With the assembling of the court and the royal family for the duel, the picture of Claudius' regime (the collective revelation of his black masses) is complete.

In the succession of "ritual scenes" with its center and climax in Hamlet's little play, it is obvious that Hamlet himself plays a central role. In the two rituals of the prologue he is, like the audience, a mere puzzled and troubled bystander. After the hidden struggles of Acts I, II and III, he presents, with his play, his own black mass, his own parody of a rite. He does not appear for the "tearing asunder" of Ophelia's madness, for this marks the Pathos of the regime, and of the lives that depend directly

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on it; and his life (wherever it may be) has already withdrawn from all loyalty to Claudius' Denmark. But he returns to record Ophelia's truncated funeral in his cold, spent, but clear awareness; and to take his fated role in the duel at the end. I have endeavored to study the rituals as marking the progress of the "play as a whole"; but it is evident that in the play, and in the order of the rituals, Hamlet himself is both chief "agonist" and central "reflector." With this in mind it is possible to offer an interpretation of the role of Hamlet in relation to Shakespeare's idea of the theatre, and the traditional social values which the play assumes.

*An Interpretation of the Role of Hamlet.*

*For, by the image of my cause, I see*
*The portraiture of his.*

Oedipus, as I have pointed out, starts out as the "hero," the triumphant human adequate to rule, and ends, like Tiresias, a "scapegoat": a witness and a sufferer for the hidden truth of the human condition. The play starts with the conflict and contrast between Oedipus and Tiresias, shows the steps of Oedipus' dismemberment, and ends when he is blind and all-seeing and helpless as Tiresias was in the beginning. Hamlet is apparently thought of as undergoing a similar transformation, from hero to scapegoat, from "the expectancy and rose of the fair state" to the distracted, suffering witness and victim of Act V. But this development is not neatly laid out for him according to a publicly understood series of struggles: he feels his way toward it, not with public sanction, but against the faithless worldliness of the Danes. It is not until Act V that his martyr-like destiny "feels right" to him.

We see him in the first three acts of the play as a puzzled, and as it were, unconvinced "hero" and Prince. He knows that "the times are out of joint" and that he is born to set them right; he knows that the Prince should be moved by honor and ambition: but he cannot reconcile his worldly code with his sense of evil in Denmark, nor with the otherworldly solicitations of his Ghost-

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father. From Corneille to Dryden the ethical values of "honor" will be taken as sufficient basis for the drama of human life; but Hamlet's sense of his own and Denmark's condition contradicts this simplified philosophy. When he looks at Laertes, that "noble youth," he envies him—envies, at least, his simple and honorable motivations. When he looks at Fortinbras, he envies him the ability to risk his own and other lives for honor—"even for an eggshell." If he could accept this code, he would feel that the murder of Claudius would heal the schism in his own soul and in society; but just as his sense of evil preceded his knowledge of Claudius' literal guilt, so he cannot believe that the literal punishment of Claudius (an eye for an eye) will cure the damage he has done. And so his drama becomes far deeper than a simple revenge play.

If Hamlet is not content with the simple soldierly code of honor, it is because he sees too deeply and sceptically into that cosmic setting of human life which Shakespeare's Theatre symbolically represented. He sees beyond the tiny human involvements of the foreground to the social order indicated by the Stage House façade, and above that, to the order in the stars implied by the canopy over his head. This is especially clear in his first scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act II, scene 2). It is in this scene that he makes the great speech on Man which Tillyard quotes as an exposition of the traditional ordered universe. But the speech ends bitterly: "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

Though Hamlet accepts this order, he does not know where he belongs in it; he is not even sure which way is up. He would have felt the force of that remark of Heracleitus which Eliot uses as epigraph to *Burnt Norton*: "The way up and the way down are one and the same." His intellect plays over the world of the religious tradition with an all-dissolving irony like that of Montaigne in the *Apologie de Raimond Sebonde*: a truly double-edged irony, for he can neither do *with* nor do *without* the ancient moral and cosmic order.

That is why he has a despairing fellow-feeling for Rosencrantz

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and Guildenstern. He knows them for little trimmers, neither for God nor for the Devil, but "for themselves," like the dim figures in Dante's Limbo: "indifferent children of the earth," "Fortune's privates," as they call themselves. He is himself anything but indifferent, yet he does not at that moment know *how* to care, and so he feels himself, like them, lost between "greatness" and the chill of mere bodily "weight" and utter faithlessness at the bottom of the universe. Thus he is troubled with "bad dreams":

Guil. *Which dreams, indeed, are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is but the shadow of a dream.*

Ham. *A dream itself is but a shadow.*

Ros. *Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.*

Ham. *Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and out-stretched heroes the beggars' shadows. Shall we to the court? for, my fay, I cannot reason.*

Hamlet draws the deduction which troubles him, but not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: if ambition like Fortinbras' is illusory what, in Denmark, is to show us the way, and prevent us from taking the "shadow as a solid thing"?

It would be an exaggeration to say that Hamlet envies these two as he envies Fortinbras and Laertes. But his fellow-feeling for them—call it sympathy, or a sense of the analogy between them, or seeing their cause as mirroring his—comes, like his envy, from the fact that he himself is lost. Until the success of his play, Hamlet feels his over-quick sympathies as a weakness, and covers them up with murderous sarcasm. On his return from England, he has accepted it, and in Act V his abnormally quick sympathy has acquired some of the quiet of the vision integrated and lived-up-to, some of the breadth of Charity.

What has intervened is chiefly the presentation of his play. When the players come, and do a speech for Hamlet, he envies *them;* but this time it turns out that he has found a real clue to his own action. He cannot act like a simple soldier, but he can

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employ the theatre in an equally dangerous, and far more significant project. He can use it as a trap for the conscience of the King, and at the same time as a test of his own and the Ghost's vision. Thus empirically, or improvisationally, feeling his way through the concrete elements of his situation, he finds his own proper line of action, and a use of the theatre very much like that which two other autobiographical characters of Shakespeare make of it.

The two other characters who use the theatre in this way are the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest*. These two plays are, of course, very different from each other and from *Hamlet*. But the analogies between the three dispossessed rulers, and their attempts to purify the spiritual atmosphere of their societies by means of significant shows, are close enough to throw a good deal of light on the nature of the role of Hamlet.

The "Duke of dark corners" is dispossessed and anonymous much as Hamlet is, even though he himself had rejected the official role of ruler. His theatricality consists in casting Angelo and Claudio and Isabella for tragic roles, and then moving about behind the scenes like a nervous regisseur, to make sure that the moral of the drama is clear, and yet that the real tragedy does not go too far. The play he arranges is almost a practical joke; yet, like Hamlet's play, it both tests and reveals a wider and healthier vision of human society than Vienna publicly accepts. And by this means he proposes to substitute the rule of charity for Angelo's blind and univocal conception of Mosaic justice. *Measure for Measure* has been called a problem comedy, and it has, in fact, a discursive clarity, a kind of modern intellectuality, quite unlike *Hamlet*. But with this reservation, the Duke as regisseur-prince is very closely akin to Hamlet in that role.

*The Tempest* has neither the analytic naturalism of *Hamlet* nor the "thesis" quality of *Measure for Measure*. It partakes of the qualities of myth, of medieval allegory, and of dream; as though Shakespeare's mind, at the end of his career, were in that state which Dante knew, in the early morning, at the threshold of the Mount of Purgatory:

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*When our mind, wandering farther from the flesh and less caught by thought, is in its visions almost prophetic.*

The basic donné of the play is the magic of Prospero. And hence the shows with which he purges the worldly exiles from Milan can be close to the very Idea of such shows. Mr. Colin Still (in *The Timeless Theme*) has traced in them many ancient ritual themes. It is in this play that Shakespeare comes to terms with his own imaginative power as a wielder of the theatre—indicating its use in the service of truth, and its limitations as a means of salvation. For at the end, when Prospero has demonstrated both the magic power of the theatre and its use, he buries his book and staff and prays for grace. He has a ripeness and a clarity and a power which Hamlet lacks, but for that very reason he helps one to see what Hamlet, with his play, was trying to do.

Hamlet, more than either the Duke or Prospero, is defenseless and uninstructed in the midst of life; and if he stumbles on the theatre as a means of realizing his vision and his anonymous being, he does not clearly understand what he has accomplished. When the King rises after the play, Hamlet takes his success with almost childish pleasure: "Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers, if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me, with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?" The delight is, of course, partly ironic; moreover he has still to confirm his success with his mother and the King. Even after those two interviews he is puzzled and tormented; he does not really feel that he has done his part, borne his witness, taken his stand, until he returns from England. By that time his testimony has had its effect: the regime is wounded beyond repair, and he himself is doomed.

In Act V, while he records in the graveyard the vision of death —literal death and the death of society, to the accompaniment of the heartless equivocations of the clowns—and finally suffers the truncated funeral of Ophelia—he feels that his role, all but the very last episode, has been played. He is still uncertain what this will be, still feels that it must include the killing of Claudius:

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"Is't not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm?" His personal hatred for the King is sharp as ever; but he is content, now, to let the fated end come as it will. "It will be short: the interim is mine; and a man's life's no more than to say 'one'." He feels, I think, whether he or his author would put it so or not, that he is ready to take the consequences of his revelation, to *suffer* for that truth: "Thou wouldst not think how ill's all here about my heart; but it is no matter . . . It is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman . . . The readiness is all." One could say that he feels the *poetic* rightness of his own death. One could say, with Ernest Jones, that because of his Oedipus Complex he had a death-wish all along. Or one could say that his death was the only adequate expiation for the evil of Denmark, according to the ancient emotional logic of the scapegoat; or one could say that only by accepting death to prove it could the truth of his vision be properly affirmed.

However one may interpret it, when his death comes it "feels right," the only possible end for the play. Horatio makes music for his going-off like that which accompanies Oedipus' death at Colonnus: "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." And Fortinbras treats him like one of those honor-seekers that had puzzled him all along, as though in his career the hero had somehow been subsumed in the martyr: "Let four captains bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage." We are certainly intended to feel that Hamlet, however darkly and uncertainly he worked, had discerned the way to be obedient to his deepest values, and accomplished some sort of purgatorial progress for himself and Denmark.

I am aware that this interpretation of the role of Hamlet is open to the same sort of objections as all other interpretations; there is no substitute for the direct knowledge which a good performance of the play would give. But it is my thesis that Shakespeare, in writing the play, was counting on such a performance, and upon the willing make-believe of his audience and his performers. The elements of the Tudor monarchy, of the emblematic stage of the Globe, and of the traditional cosmos they stood

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for, were accepted for the purposes of the play as real; and within the concrete elements of this scene the role of Hamlet has its own logic.

*Analogous Actions: An Interpretation of the Play.*

*For Goodness, growing to a plurisy,*
*Dies in his own too-much.*

The remark of the King, which he uses as a warning to Laertes, and which I have used to describe Hamlet's over-quick and over-subtle sympathy, applies also to Shakespeare's principles of composition in the play as a whole. Shakespeare's sense of analogy is perhaps too productive, burgeoning too richly in all directions, as though the dramatic life he had got hold of gave him more instances than he needed. Yet it is my belief that the life itself, the germ, the "unity" is there, however overlaid with elaborations and confusingly illumined from many directions.

Miss Caroline Spurgeon discerned this underlying life, I think, quite accurately, as a result of her studies of the metaphors in the play: "To Shakespeare's pictorial imagination," she writes, "the problem in *Hamlet* is not predominantly that of the will and reason, of a mind too philosophic or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly: he sees it pictorially *not as the problem of an individual at all,* but as something greater and even more mysterious, as a *condition* for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development, impartially and relentlessly annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of *Hamlet,* as it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life."

Miss Spurgeon offers a kind of scientific proof of her view of the play by showing that the predominant metaphors are those of disease. An analysis of the play as the imitation of action gives the same result. The action of the play as a whole is "to identify and destroy the hidden imposthume which is endangering the life of Denmark." But because the source of infection is hidden, and

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there is no general agreement about its nature or location, the action of the play is predominantly in the passive mode—the suffering of forces not controlled or understood, rather than the consistent drive of an intelligible purpose. *Hamlet* is, like *The Cherry Orchard,* in its essential structure an "ensemble pathos", broken from time to time by the spasmodic moves of one or two of the characters.

This action is realized in many analogous ways in the contrasted characters. Claudius, who identifies the health of Denmark with the safety of his own corrupt regime and therefore merely wishes to hold what he has, gradually comes to feel that the imposthume which poisons the communal life and his own is Hamlet: "for like the hectic in my blood he rages." Polonius, the chief figure in the comic sub-plot, also identifies the health of the body politic with the status quo; and for him the dis-ease is only the normal but troublesome fire of youth: Laertes' appetite for drabbing and gambling, Hamlet's infatuation for Ophelia—both to be cured by a judicious mixture of discipline and indulgence, which his age and experience can easily concoct.

Gertrude and Ophelia (like other women pictured by Shakespeare) define their actions and their beings only with reference to their men; and since they both have a stake in the regime, and at the same time in the rebellious Hamlet, they suffer the worst of the disease itself. In the economy of the play, they are symbols and measures of the health of the body politic—glamorous signs of what might have been, and torn and dishonored images of what is.

Hamlet himself, as we saw, comes the closest to seeing the whole range of the disease, as it spreads from the immediate guilt of Claudius to ruin all dependent lives. And we have seen that the adequate response to the rottenness of Denmark as he sees it, is not a simple, purposive course of action, but a bearing-witness and a suffering-for-the-truth.

The characters have not only analogous objects of their actions, they all act in a similar way, *indirectly.* Polonius has his "windlasses" and his "assays of bias." Claudius acts only through inter-

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mediaries: Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes. Ophelia acts as the puppet of her father, and Hamlet by means of his symbolic play. The Gravedigger speaks in equivocations, and Osric in such a "yesty collection" of ornamental clichés that he is barely comprehensible.

In defining the action of the play as a whole, the one underlying "essence" which the actions of the various characters "adumbrate" in their different ways, the character of Claudius is all-important—not because he sees more, or realizes a deeper life but because as head of the state he is, *de facto,* the one center of "weight" and of "greatness." As Tudor monarch, father, king and high-priest, the massy wheel upon which the lives of the many depend, he makes, so to speak, the spiritual weather in Denmark. It is his particular kind of spiritual night—his motionless worldly presence, like a wall; his gratified lust ("fat weed on Lethe wharf," "things rank and gross in nature")—which defines the action in *Hamlet.* In such a nonconducting atmosphere, all purposes are short, hidden and mistook, and they soon sink into frightened or oblivious stagnation. As long as he rules, "Denmark is a prison," "one of the worst" of the world's many confines, closed away from Dante's "*dolce mondo.*"

From this point of view, Claudius' place in the economy of the play is like that of Macbeth in his play; Shakespeare thinks of the usurper in both cases as defining the "scene" and thereby the action of the play. Macbeth is in his moral being quite unlike Claudius; and he produces a different action and a different rhythm in the play as a whole. Macbeth is like a man running downhill to escape himself: however fast he goes, "the pauser, reason," is still with him. In his depraved career he lays an irrational and obsessive basis for all human thought and intercourse; hence every action is paradoxical and unnatural. Even the peripety, when Macduff, Malcolm and Ross are forced to take action against Macbeth, is realized as a tissue of denials and paradoxes. The final assault upon the castle is (in spite of its healthy marching rhythm) unreasonable and unnatural too. The wood moves, the leader is unborn of woman, and the soldiers are sustained

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by the super-rational, the miraculous blessings and graces that hang about King Edward's throne.

Mr. Kenneth Burke has pointed out that "action" may be defined in terms of "scene." This is one of the principles of composition in the Divine Comedy: human actions are presented in an orderly succession of scenes which concretely realize and define them. But Dante's tremendous subject was human life and action in general, while the subject of a Shakespearean tragedy is, more immediately, human action under a particular regime, or at a particular historic moment. His dramatis personae are seldom seeking salvation directly, but rather trying to realize a human life in a concrete society. That is why an analysis like Miss Spurgeon's is so suggestive, and takes one so far toward an understanding of the play as a whole—much farther, for example, than the attempt to rationalize Hamlet's character, as though Shakespeare had been writing a drama of the individual will and reason only.

Yet there are dangers in an analysis based on metaphor. Such an analysis leaves *Hamlet* at the level of the romantic lyric, as though its "logic" were a logic of feeling only, and its principles of composition those of "association and contrast," as Mr. Burke calls them. Such an analysis works better for *Tristan* than for *Hamlet,* for it leaves out the substantial elements (the beings of the individual characters, the stable elements in the traditional cosmos) which underlie the associated or contrasted *qualities* of their lives, the "atmosphere" or feeling tone of the play. Miss Spurgeon's lyrical or subjective or qualitative analysis needs to be supported and extended by a more Realist analysis, one based for instance on the four levels of medieval symbolism.

According to this system, the analogous *actions* of the characters in their attempts to destroy the hidden disease of Denmark would constitute the "trope" or moral meaning of the play. The rottenness of the regime itself, from which they all suffer, could be called the "allegory," for it refers to a particular moment in history, when a corrupt regime falsifies the life of the community. We have seen that in *Hamlet,* as in *Macbeth,* Shakespeare

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takes this historic moment as defining his subject. But Shakespeare is no Spenglerian determinist; in spite of his worldly focus, his preoccupation with social order, and his feeling for the "divine sanction" of kingship, he places Claudius' Denmark in a wider setting; and this "placing" of Claudius' regime is the anagoge, the meaning of the play in relation to ultimate values.

Miss Spurgeon records the fact that there is in *Hamlet* a series of images contrasting with those of disease and darkness; and, indeed, from the first, we are made to feel that the condition of the Danes is not the human condition *uberhaupt,* but only a particular version of it. Ophelia's description of Hamlet, "What a noble mind is here o'erthrown," contrasts his present plight with what she feels to be his natural role: "the expectancy and rose of the fair state." Hamlet's description of his father in his terrible interview with his mother, has a similar effect—to make us feel that a natural and divinely-sanctioned order has been betrayed and lost. And in his famous speech on "man, the paragon of animals," though the context gives it depths of irony, Hamlet unrolls the traditional moral order as both good and true, though he has somehow lost a vital relation to it. But it is chiefly in Act V that Claudius' regime is seen for what it is, brought to its temporal end, and placed in a wider and therefore truer scene.

Act V unrolls for us, first of all, a picture of Denmark after it has been torn asunder, its deathliness or its non-entity laid as it were flat and open to the eye of the audience and the eyes of Hamlet. The vision, as usual in Shakespeare, is firmly based upon the most direct sensory impact (like the darkness of Act I, scene 1) and proceeds then to elaborate ever wider and more complex perspectives. The basic sensual impression is the brutal digging up of skulls; then comes the solemn-joyful equivocating of the clowns—a denial of all meaning, the end result of Claudius' falsity. With this goes a series of hints of social disorder: the dead receive no respect; the professions, especially law, are laughably helpless; "the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe." As for the courtiers, we shall presently have Osric: "He did

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comply with his dug before he sucked it." Osric corresponds to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a more shameless hypocrite and time-server, much as the clowns correspond to Polonius in their complacent irrelevancy, but speak in equivocations where Polonius, less deathly, merely rationalizes upon false premises.

From this opening impression of literal death and of meaninglessness in many forms comes the funeral of Ophelia, the "maimèd rite." I have already pointed out its place in the succession of rituals. It is full of cross-references: to the funerals of Hamlet the first and Polonius; to Gertrude's corrupt marriage; to the marriage of Ophelia and Hamlet, which never occurred; and to Ophelia's mad mixture of funeral and marriage.

The second scene of Act V, with the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, shows the dénouements of all the intrigues in the play: Polonius is avenged by Laertes; Laertes, like Hamlet, falls victim to Claudius' deceits; Gertrude follows Ophelia; Hamlet kills the King at last, and Fortinbras finally appears upon the Danish scene, the new faith and hope which Claudius no longer prevents. But these events, which literally end the narratives in the play, and bring Claudius' regime to its temporal end, tell us nothing new but the *fact* that the sentence which fate or providence pronounced long since, has now been executed. It is the pageantry, the ceremonial mummery, in short the ritual character of this scene which makes us feel it as the final epiphany, the showing-forth of the true nature of Claudius' regime.

The staging of this scene is parallel to that of Claudius' first court (Act I, scene 2) and to that of the Players' Scene. It is the last time we see all the dramatis personae gathered to celebrate the social order upon which they all depend. But whereas we saw Claudius' first court as smooth, plausible, almost majestic, and ostensibly devoted to guarding the welfare of all the subjects, we see this last court, all in mourning, for the death-trap it is. The vision of Claudius' Denmark which Hamlet's play presented as a parable is now brilliantly and literally visible. As soon as we glimpse it with this literal clarity, it is gone like a bad dream, and we are returned, with the healthy rhythms of young For-

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tinbras, to the wider world of the order of nature, with the possibility at least of divine sanction.

Thus the "placing" of the play follows immediately upon the completion of its action. Fortinbras is the agent; and in the scheme of the whole the role of Fortinbras, though it is very economically developed, is of major importance.

I have already pointed out that Fortinbras' story is one of the variations on the son-father theme. When we first hear of Fortinbras he, like Hamlet (and later, Laertes) is trying to avenge a dead and dishonored father. Like Hamlet, he has an uncle who stands *in loco parentis.* Like Laertes, he is a simple and noble youth, expending his high spirits upon the worldly code of "honor," yet at the same time he is a "good child," obedient to age—so that when his uncle tells him to, he is quite willing to turn his martial ambitions from the Danes to the Poles. But unlike both Hamlet and Laertes he does not live under Claudius' shadow: his obedience is not (like Laertes' obedience to Claudius) misplaced—and his life works itself out (as we hear) in a reign free of the Danish infections.

Thus the role of Fortinbras, in *Hamlet,* corresponds to those of Malcolm, Macduff and King Edward in *Macbeth.* Like them, he is felt as a constant, though offstage, threat to the corrupt regime. Like them, he does not appear in the flesh until after the peripety, and, though we feel his approach, does not enter Denmark until Claudius is gone. Like Malcolm and Macduff, he has his own version of the main action of the play. He moves and fights in the dark as much as his contemporaries, Hamlet and Laertes; but his darkness is not the artificial shadow of Claudius but the natural darkness of inexperience. He confronts it with a kind of sanguine natural faith, "exposing all that's mortal and unsure even for a eggshell"—as he could not (Laertes' example is there to prove it) in Denmark. That is why he cannot enter Denmark until the end. In the same way, in *Macbeth,* we are not ready for Macduff's and Malcolm's reception of Grace until Macbeth and his Queen have reached the nightmarish stalemate of the Banquet scene. When the avengers appear before Macbeth's

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castle, they show him that there is another way to "outrun reason"; and when Fortinbras comes in at the end, he *places* the action we have seen in Denmark, both with reference to the wider world from which he comes, and with reference to his healthier version of "the fight in the dark," the "quest for the unseen danger." Fortinbras' darkness of natural faith is the last variation, this time in a major key, which Shakespeare plays upon his great theme.

This does not mean that Fortinbras, either in his character or in his vision, provides an answer to Hamlet's "problem"—nor does it mean that his example is intended to show that the experience of the play was simply illusory. This experience was "real," just as Dante's experience of Hell was real—though this is the region of low ceilings, and of those who have lost the good of the intellect. Hamlet sees a great deal that Fortinbras will never see; but Hamlet, who has his own limited being, is defined by it and by the spiritual realm in which he moves; and this is not all of life. Fortinbras does not destroy, he "places" the action of the play, by suddenly revealing a new analogue of this action. The effect, once more, is not to provide us with an intellectual key, an explicit philosophy, but to release us from the contemplation of the limited mystery of Denmark, by returning us to the wider mystery of life in the world at large.

Thus it seems to me that the elements of Shakespeare's composition (like those of Sophocles and Dante before him) are not qualities, like those of the romantics with their logic of feeling, not abstract concepts, like those of the dramatists of the age of Reason, with their clear and distinct moral ideas, but beings, real people in a real world, related to each other in a vast and intricate web of analogies.

I know that analogy is a very difficult concept to use with accuracy. I have endeavored to raise some of the questions connected with it in my essay, *Analogy as a Principle of Composition*. At this point I merely wish to point out that the anagoge, or ultimate meaning of the play, can only be sought through a study of the analogical relationships within the play, and, by

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implication, between the world of Denmark and the traditional cosmos. There are the analogous actions of all the characters, pointing to the action which is the underlying substance of the play. There are the analogous father-son relationships, and the analogous man-woman relationships. There are the analogous stories, or chains of events, the fated results of the characters' actions. And stretching beyond the play in all directions are the analogies between Denmark and England; Denmark and Rome under "the mightiest Julius"; Hamlet's stage and Shakespeare's stage; the theatre and life. Because Shakespeare takes all these elements as "real," he can respect their essential mystery, not replacing them with abstractions, nor merely exploiting their qualities as mood-makers, nor confining us in an artificial world with no exit. He asks us to sense the unity of his play through the direct perception of these analogies; he does not ask us to replace our sense of a real and mysterious world with a consistent artifact, "the world of the play."

If Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is Realist in the tradition represented by Sophocles and Dante, if he composes by analogy rather than by "qualitative progression" or "syllogistic progression," then the question of *Hamlet* as an artistic success appears in a different light. Because it is rooted in an ancient tradition, and in a theatre central to its culture, it is not only a work of art, but a kind of more-than-individual natural growth, like the culture itself, and Shakespeare is not so much its inventor as its god-like recorder: "*Cuando amor spira, vo significando.*" The question is not whether the subject Shakespeare intends is *there,* but whether it is there in too bewildering a richness and complexity. The besetting sin of the Renaissance, as Pico foresaw, was an over-indulgence in the imagination as it discerns analogies of every kind. M. Gilson has explained how even Bonaventura could abuse his gift for analogizing, losing at times the distinction between real analogy and the superficial correspondences which his faith led him to see. And Mr. Scott Buchanan in *Poetry and Mathematics,* asks the suggestive question, at what point in history, and by what process, was the clue to the vast system of Medieval

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analogies lost, the thread broken, and the way cleared for the centreless proliferations of modern culture?

Of this question too Shakespeare seems to have been prophetically aware. Like Hamlet, he felt, perhaps, too wide a sympathy, too precise a scruple. His endless sense of analogical relationships, though a good, *could* "grow to a plurisy." And *Hamlet* can be regarded as a dramatization of the process which led, in the Renaissance, to the modern world and its fragmentary theatres.

*Hamlet and the Modern Theatre.*

Mr. Eliot remarked that the age of Shakespeare "moved toward chaos"; and he noted that Shakespeare's theatre (compared, say, with Racine's) had no consistent and clear conventions which might have prevented it from degenerating into naturalism, sensationalism, or editorializing. If Shakespeare had an "Idea of the Theatre" it was a very comprehensive and many-sided one, which, to be realized at all, was obliged to comprehend many discordant elements in precarious and hidden harmony. Or you may say, if you take the view that he "succeeded," that his notion of the theatre was so deep that it foresaw, as it were, in significant relationship, the more limited dramatic genres which were to develop later.

Mr. Mark Van Doren noted, about *The Tempest,* that "any set of symbols, moved close to this play, lights up as in an electric field." *Hamlet* has the same mysterious property. Most dramas that were written since Shakespeare, when moved close to *Hamlet,* are themselves illumined, and seem to offer the clue to the interpretation of Shakespeare's great work.

If there is an exception to this observation, it is the drama of Rationalism. Racine's masterpieces have a kind of consistency and explicit unity which is utterly foreign to Shakespeare. If the rationalism of the next age is foreseen at all in *Hamlet,* it is in the role of Polonius, with his faith in logic, his feeling for the neat antithesis and the triumphant demonstration, and his rhythms of speech—for, though he speaks in blank verse, his sense of language suggests the heroic couplet.

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But the romantics took *Hamlet* for their own; and a generation later most critics thought that the greatness of the play lay in its naturalistic truth to nature—and when they criticized it, they objected that Shakespeare was less photographic than Ibsen. In our own time, Pirandello's desperate theatricality is seen as having been anticipated by Hamlet the *improvisateur.*

The age of Shakespeare "moved toward chaos," and the great mirror of his theatre was broken into fragments. But it lasted long enough to give us, in *Hamlet,* the last image of western man in the light of his great tradition.

[Mr. Fergusson's *Idea of the Theatre,* of which this essay is a chapter, is to be published in the fall by the Princeton University Press.]

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# *A Chorus from Oedipus Rex**

*(translated by Robert Fitzgerald and Dudley Fitts)*

ἰὼ γενεαὶ βροτῶν . . .

Alas for the seed of men.

What measure shall I give these generations
That breathe on the void and are void
And exist and do not exist?

Who bears more weight of joy
Than mass of sunlight shifting in images,
Or who shall make his thought stay on
That down time drifts away?

Your splendor is all fallen.

O naked brow of wrath and tears,
O change of Oedipus!
I who saw your days call no man blest—
Your great days like ghosts gone.

That mind was a strong bow.

Deep, how deep you drew it then, hard archer,
At a dim fearful range
And brought dear glory down!

You overcame the stranger—
The virgin with her hooking lion claws—
And though death sang, stood like a tower
To make pale Thebes take heart.

*From a translation of *Oedipus Rex* to be published by Harcourt, Brace in the fall.

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Fortress against our sorrow!

Divine king, giver of laws,
Majestic Oedipus!
No prince in Thebes had ever such renown,
No prince won such grace of power.

And now of all men ever known
Most pitiful is this man's story:
His fortunes are most changed, his state
Fallen to a low slave's
Ground under bitter fate.

O Oedipus, most royal one!
The great door that expelled you to the light
Gave at night—ah, gave night to your glory—
As to the father, to the fathering son.

All understood too late.

How could the queen whom Laïos won,
The garden that he harrowed at his height,
Be silent when that act was done?

But all eyes fail before time's eye,
All actions come to justice there.
Though never willed, though far down the deep past,
Your bed, your dread sirings
Are brought to book at last.

Child by Laïos doomed to die—
Then doomed to lose that fortunate small death—
Would God you never took breath in this air
That with my wailing lips I take to cry!

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For I weep the world's outcast.

Blind I was, and cannot tell why;
Asleep, for you had given ease of breath;
A fool, while the false years went by.

## *Meditation*

*At Fra Angelico's sepulchre in the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva.*

*ROBERT FITZGERALD*

His working days were golden: Tuscan light
Vested his little priesthood when he drew;
This funeral dusk would never have come right
In his fresh tempera, but the dusk came true.
His morning angels never knew such cold;
He felt it briefly. When his breath was gone,
One there who worked in stone took his death mould
To cut this that a dim lantern shines on:
The angelic brother, his starved lineaments
Harshly chiselled in the cowl, his eyes
Staring at fearful peace, his formal hands,
Where the rude cape divides, chastened crosswise:
Ancient and homely in the floor at Rome.
Here Pope and prior let the mortal tears come.

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# *As You Were*

*KATHERINE HOSKINS*

FRESH FROM the rivered lawns, the solid brick of the Army War College, "These crazy little Cambridge houses," Colonel Stanley Dove remarked to himself as he thanked the high-school girl who opened the door and marched himself up to the new-lit fire in the living room. There he clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed the quiescent good taste, the undeniable charm that Marta had created out of practically nothing. Then he turned to the mantel and studied a photograph of the two boys, picking out his godson.

But no picture of Hervey? he wondered suddenly. No big studio portrait of the man in uniform, severe and trim, bare-headed unless he were growing bald, when the cap would tilt a gallant line across the forehead? Above the desk he found a snapshot of Hervey in fatigue clothes and leaning on, of all things, a mattock. Hervey bald and with no cap on, Hervey as he might have turned from digging any old hole for the last ten years—his dark, soft face as compelling, shining and anomalous as a full moon and not ever a studio subject.

Colonel Dove walked back to the mirror over the mantel and tightened his tie. His new eagles twinkled at him in the glass and he severely straightened invisible wrinkles about them. With his bright blue eyes and graying hair he looked like a bluejay that has sprouted egrets; bold before, now proud.

In a rosy housecoat, her curly black hair high on her head, Marta came to him with both hands out. "Dear Stan." "Dear Marta." He took her head in his hands and kissed her high sloping forehead.

"And the lovely birds," she laughed. "Aren't you very young?"

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"It's a young man's war, you know."

"Don't I know!"

He sat down with the fire before him and Marta beside him fiddling with teacups and strainer and, Damn it this is pleasant, he thought. Often his nimble waist and bright eyes, his cocktail party fluency had procured him invitations to similar surroundings where he would sit in dumb realization that the teacups were ready to tinkle out of sight for the right word, the right gesture, and leave but the facility promised by a housecoat. How many times had he not sat frozen while the opportunity passed and his hostess' smile turned from anticipation to boredom. How many times had he not left such a promising situation for the girl presently attached to him, a girl whose lack of elegance might offend him but whose facility did not depend on ritual approach. With Marta, the teacups were simple in their purpose and Marta, beautiful and elegant beyond them, was the daughter of one of his early commanding officers, the mother of his godchild and, with her husband overseas, an object of benevolence.

He swallowed his tea comfortably and ate two pieces of toast and told Marta that, Yes, he had seen his sister, that he was going to New York tonight. Yes, he had a room. Then, as the news about his assignment in Europe came closer and as he couldn't put off much longer asking about Hervey, he roused himself and said, "Now, Martie, I want a drink."

"Why, Stan, how stupid of me. Of course an old soldier doesn't want tea."

"I did want tea," he insisted, admiring her figure, the lovely carriage of her head and shoulders; "now I want a drink." She brought him the makings and he fixed himself a stout highball and lifted the glass at nothing in particular. "Here's to Hervey." *Private* Hervey Blair, he added to himself, with a wife like that, my God. She probably washes all the dishes and cooks all the meals. I wouldn't be surprised if she had to take in washing.

Her eyes had watered, as women's eyes did so easily these days.

"What do you hear of him, my dear?"

"Not much. He's been in Paris. He mentioned my cousin."

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"Has he seen any fighting?"

"After the landing. . . . He didn't say much about it. . . . His last letter was from Grenoble. At least, he said he had been to school there." She leaned back as if she were very tired. "He never complains, but I know the life doesn't suit him."

He had meant to say, I'm going over there soon, a matter of days now, and I may well be able to see him. Give me a message. But the old anger at Hervey's pigheadedness revived, exaggerated by the gross incongruity of a woman like Marta being subject to economic worries. "It's all so damned unnecessary. If Herve had used his head, he could have been a major by now. . . . He ought to be in G2." He took a long drink. "No, I don't understand it. It's downright unpatriotic not to give the Service the best you have instead of hiding your light under a pick-axe."

"Well, Stan, that's the way he wanted it."

It was the first time she hadn't defended her husband and his ill-temper vanished. "You're a wonderful woman, Martie."

She leaned over and touched his hand. "You've been very good to us, you know." She recalled how Stan had flown to Boston to urge Hervey to apply for officer candidates school. ("Now you've been democratic, Herve, for God's sake get where you belong or you'll be taking orders from the local garbage collector." And Hervey, "To command implies belief—I don't.")

"Well, it's a funny thing—and you the daughter of a West Pointer."

"It makes things a little lonely," she conceded delicately. "You see, my friends, the girls at Red Cross, talk about promotions all the time. . . . And it's easier to keep track of officers. They tell their wives when they've seen so and so and the wives write each other. . . . I don't think Hervey has any friends—and their wives probably couldn't write anyway. . . . Privates—" she wasn't conceding now but pulling it all out, even things she hadn't allowed herself to think. "And then the whippersnapper sons of my older friends come along with bars and oak leaves and I think of Herve having to salute them—his own students, maybe. . . . He seems

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so lost and with nothing to distinguish him. . . . And he's so much more distinguished than lots of the others."

"You bet he is."

"That's why I see so much of Frannie Albright. Her husband is still here and in civilians. They ask me how Herve is as if he were out at Huntington doing research." She laughed caustically and picked her knitting from a bag on the back of her chair. By the time she had the yarn and needles arranged, she was able to looked at him with her usual calm. "They've been wonderful to me, though—really wonderful."

"I saw Frannie yesterday. She said you were wonderful." "How is Martie?" he had asked. "She must find life a strain." And Frannie had said, "O, Martie has her resources," as if Martie had an amulet. "Poetry?" "Well, *certain* poetry," Frannie had answered down her long nose. To be intellectual had always constituted a solemn duty for Frannie. Marta took it in her stride. Her difficult reading matter was as much a part of her as changing her name from Martha, as getting into a housecoat to entertain him even if she did have to cook supper, as constantly making mention of her French cousin by marriage to explain her little foreign airs when Quebec was the most exotic place she had ever visited. "What are you reading lately?"

"Oh, still George Herbert." Her smile charmingly included him in her enthusiasm. "You know, I said that lovely one, 'Love bade me welcome' to Gordon the other night—your Gordon—and he said, 'I like that, Mother, say it again.' Pretty good for a boy of nine, don't you think?"

"I do, Martie."

"He's sweet, Stan. They're both sweet. They take care of me and are good as if they realized. . . . They try so hard not to get in my hair." A quick gesture towards her head put the phrase in quotation marks. "I hope they come in before you go. I so want you to see them."

"Why don't you say that poem to me?"

"Shall I?" She laid down her knitting and with quiet hands and

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half-closed eyes, recited it in her clear soft voice. Stan made up phrases to run through his head. 'My Gordon'—'before I left, we sat very quietly by the fire'—'there was no other sound but the crackle of logs and the sound of Marta's voice, the music of Marta's voice.' But he couldn't hold to them. Marta had looked at him with the warm simplicity of the inelegant women he had known and he was beset by a vision of his hotel room with Marta in it instead of Emma. Marta elegant, yet as grateful as Emma for a little fun and comfort. The idea made him slightly dizzy.

" 'So I did sit and eat,' " Marta said and was silent.

Now that was a funny way to end a poem, but he supposed he was old-fashioned. Anyway, he thought proudly, he could bet none of the fine ladies of Washington could recite a modern poem like that, right off the bat. "I feel like my Gordon," he said. "I'd like to hear it all over again." She smiled at him warmly and took up her knitting and he thought he wouldn't care if she wanted to recite poetry even in New York.

He was about to speak when suddenly the boys were standing between them, holding out their hands. Even when he handed his oak leaves to Gordon, Marta did not look at him. All her care was that her son should give creditable thanks. "Now you'll outrank every boy in your class, Gordon." With increasing relief, he castigated himself for harboring lecherous thoughts towards the daughter of a former commanding officer; thoughts foolhardy, to say the least, for if Marta didn't recite poetry, she would talk about the children. Emma was at least dependable and his last days in the States were no time for experimenting. He kissed Marta on the forehead and directed his steps down the leaf-strewn narrow path. At the gate he turned and saluted the doorway where she stood supported by her sons.

Marta turned briskly into the house, sent the boys to their homework and gathered up the tea things. When she returned to the living room, she hesitated over the bottles and ice, thinking how pleasant it would be to pour herself a highball and enjoy a little quiet until it should be time to get supper. But the picture of a woman alone and drinking did not please her, even when

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she had added George Herbert to the other hand. She would do better to get on with her sock.

More than anything, she wanted to recall exactly what she had said to Stan so that she would know if she had been disloyal to Hervey. What had got into her, she wondered, even to suggest that everything Hervey might do had not been discussed with her previously and agreed upon? Marriage, she had been known to say and had meticulously practiced, was democracy in little. A man and his wife should talk things over until they find a common ground for action, then they must proceed as a unit. Even now she wrote Hervey all the problems of the boys, the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters and explained exactly what her decisions had been and why. "I read your letter over a blacked-out fire," he had written once and that was how she imagined him reading all her letters; over that small dull fire first conjured by her father's accounts of the Spanish-American war. He would read—she could see his face lighted by the mild embers as it had so often been lighted when they were camping in New Hampshire—and sometimes he would disagree. She knew how his face tightened, he rarely frowned. But always in the end he would allow that she was right. In New Hampshire, he would put his arm around her and bring her close and say, "O.K., Toots—you done all right." And she would beg him not to use slang in front of the boys. Then she would watch him flip the silvery fish she had earlier watched him catch, allow his body's warmth to dominate her, allow him his turn now in the gentle silent duel that was their life together.

Resolutely she pulled herself out of the strands of emotion tangled by the New Hampshire fire, that fire in France, all the fires of all the old wars and the one before her in the room that had doubtless set her off. The boys mustn't see her with wet eyes. As she turned on the lights and picked up her knitting, the doorbell rang and Frannie and Jack Albright came in.

"We saw your lights go on," Frannie cried, "and I simply had to tell you that I think our man will get the nomination and with him on the school committee—"

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"Drinking alone, Martie?" Jack asked.

"Stan Dove was in—let's all have one. . . . Will you get some more ice, Jack?" She hoped he would notice the single glass. "Now, Frannie, tell me all about it—it's simply wonderful." It was a long time ago that she had thrashed the matter out with Hervey. As an instructor of History at Harvard, he could have got reductions for the boys at several private schools. "The hell with democracy," he had said, "I want my sons to be educated." But he had finally seen that this was a very wrong attitude. "No schools are any good," he had assented. "I suppose I ought to keep them at home and tutor them. Then maybe they wouldn't be ignoramuses and they wouldn't be soft-skinned little snobs, either." But that wasn't the point at all, she had labored to make him see. And it wasn't as if some of the nicest people didn't send their children to public school, theirs wouldn't be all alone. He had laughed at her then and put his arm around her and said, "O.K., Toots."

As Frannie talked and Jack mixed drinks, she felt revived and reoriented. This was the home front, this was women fighting in an unassailable cause. This was Marta carrying on as she dropped shrewd comments on personalities, announced that they mustn't leave a stone unturned.

The doorbell rang again and she was handed a box of ragged white chrysanthemums and a letter. Efficiency and flowers, school committee and a housecoat. (Frannie seldom got out of tweeds.) It was what Marta had always claimed a woman could stand for, should stand for. Her movements became more delicate as she opened the letter and, with their permission, read it. She felt her eyes fill with tears at Stan's tribute: A soldier's wife. . . . He would tell Herve if he could possibly find him. . . . Yes, he was going overseas. As if with an impulsive gesture, glancing up through tears, she handed them the letter. And by the time they had read it her pedestal was solid. "If all women were like you to come back to, this would be a better world." She had succeeded. The balance between efficiency and grace had been apparent. "Stay as you are," Stan commanded. He would tell Hervey.

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"To think, Martie, you could have been a Colonel's wife."

"Oh my goodness, I forgot all those silly things when I gave it to you. I was thinking of his news and that he might see Hervey. . . . Anyway, the flowers are lovely." She put them against her face and felt her two friends regarding her as through a Colonel's eyes.

"Well, I just wish I had an old batch crazy over me."

2

She undressed early and sat at Hervey's desk to bring her journal up to date. The rectitude she had betrayed in letting the Albrights read Stan's letter made her hesitate to insert it in the pages of the big account book. Would she be putting it in merely for the compliments, for compliments from an old batch that meant nothing to her? As she searched herself for vanity, she reread the letter. Its news, she decided, was really better told by Stan than by herself. And the compliments, properly understood, were no mere reaction to her looks but a challenge to her character. "Stay as you are—a soldier's wife." She foresaw that she might often need assurance that at one time she had been what she constantly strove to become. A daily becoming—she put her head down on her arms, half praying, half weeping as she tried to get straight all the mundane and spiritual qualities that made up her ideal of herself.

After a few minutes, she clipped in the message and wrote on the next page that Stan had given his oak leaves to Gordon and Gordon had said later that he would have preferred a brass hat. "What is a brass hat, Mother?" he had asked, looking at her with Hervey's mild insistent brown eyes. She had explained the mockery of the term and Harry had said, "Now that he's got oak leaves, Gordon's a brass hat," and they had started to fight.

But nothing filled the place where there should be another letter from Hervey. They must be on the move. They must be on the move she had told herself twenty times a day for the last six weeks. His last letter had been V-mail. No pages to turn, no hope that it might be longer than it looked, no hope that she

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might have missed something on first reading. "I saw your cousin. She seemed very well. Too well for my taste. One wonders if resignation must always turn into collaboration. Formerly we seldom bothered to state if people had 'character' or not, now they are being shot for lack of it." There, she thought, that is my new Hervey. That is Hervey who admits his solidity. "I went to school near here. I keep thinking I know the land, keep looking for a barn that faces south where I found primroses on a February day how many years ago?"

She had been profoundly disturbed when he enlisted without any warning to her at all. But his action had cut a vista for her, a short-cut to virtue, and she had held her head high to her friends. Then he went off, a soldier from a world of civilians. How solitary is one soldier in a railroad station, how minuscule his kit. How frail is man without impedimenta. Yet she had rejoiced in the knowledge that they were together and way out in front of the rest in rightness.

Solitary in loneliness, it was then that she began to find her religion again. She did not go to church, but read the Gospels and the prose and poetry of the seventeenth-century protestants and puritans. She tried to live by the white light of their sweetness and strength. And it seemed to her that it was in that same white light that Hervey was following their militant example. When her friends began to lose their own husbands to the training camps, she had won to the cheerful fortitude that allowed of Frannie's statement, "Martie has her resources." And soon they were saying, "How right Hervey was. This is the real war for democracy. This is the bright beautiful crusade. When will he get his commission?" And Hervey wrote from Texas, "I know now that I have never been lonely before. . . . The sink of mediocrity and filth that is the mind of the common man." But he had stayed stubbornly a private—not even first class. "It's a more unusual rank than General, even," he had laughed.

On the last day of his furlough, they had all gone to New Hampshire. He had not wanted to take the boys. "Can't we have one day to ourselves? I might want to say something to you."

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But she had shown him that the children had as much right to his last day as herself.

They had been home again—home where she had gone barefoot, where her mother had gardened, where the strict and gentle soldier her father had welcomed Hervey. Now they were themselves grown up; and what counsel could that old soldier offer from his simplicities of Flag and Country? They had felt lonely and unguarded as they stood on the stone terrace, looking down to where the road came out of the sap lot. There were the four pairs of ski tracks on the snow. They led up here and they led into the trees and to the county road beyond. Which way did they point? tracks without front or back, tracks they must duplicate before the sun sank lower. Hervey pulled her close to him and held her as if he defied the world to come and get them and make them take those tracks again. She had felt them thinking together, 'If the tracks led only here and stopped. . . . Suppose we stayed. Suppose we simply didn't go back?' And she felt a chill come over them both as, grown-up yet undecided, they faced the austerity of a choice made.

Hervey's arm sagged from defiance, but what he said was, "You know, I want to get over there." He smiled at her curiously, almost as if he didn't know her. "It's queer how much I want to go—and how afraid I am of what I'll find."

"You'll find the war, for God's sake—what do you think?" She had cried then, violently and hysterically, and hadn't heard his answer. And before she could ask him again what he had said, the boys had appeared and she had had to wipe her face and smile at them.

They were very gay when they got down the hill, back down the hill and out of the dark grove of maples. Hervey had brought out a flask and told the boys, "This is how we used to go to football games. Not your mother and me, but me and other gals and your mother—or did you, Martie, did you ever get drunk out of a flask?"

He had been gay. But when he was gone, it was the memory of those few moments on the terrace that stayed with her and she

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had written in her journal, "Hervey is changed. He is more serious. His weight shows." It had seemed as if he were really at last coming to meet her. "I say my prayers every night now," she had told him. "Do you, Martie? Do you really say prayers—kneel down and say them?" He had looked at her as if he were a lover and had discovered a new beauty in her. And when he sailed she had felt at peace, no longer afraid of what the separation might engender. He would come back believing in the value of certain things she had always stood for. She was quite sure that he would not mock the League of Lady-Voters, as he had once called them. He would take more interest in the boys. He would have a theory of history. Students wouldn't say any more, "Mr. Blair's course is fascinating, but it's tough because you never know where to find him. One day he'll argue for legitimacy and the next for revolution." That was nice for the students, for the good ones. But it didn't get books written. It didn't raise you in the academic field. And some day Hervey would wish to have risen. Belief was hard to define, but she was certain it would entail no more caustic jokes on the seriousness of life as they lived it. Thinking of the slight shift in emphasis, the reorganization of weight that had brought Hervey over to her side, she became very happy.

"If all women were like you to come back to—" She would be like that to come back to. The time of striving was over. She bent her head and prayed for strength to remain as she was.

The next day she could smile to think how even the Albrights recognized her strength and turned to her. There was a certain chaplain who had been sent home PN. He had no sooner been discharged from the army than he had discharged himself from the Church and was now wandering from one drink to the next. "A lost soul, Martie," Frannie explained; "you handle him for us, will you?" Apt passages from her poets occurred to her and she could almost hear Frannie loudly informing some future gathering, "And there was Braithwaite, a lost soul until Martie came along. She knew how to handle him. . . . She's wonderful."

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At the party, she was aware of looking serene and wise as none of the other women and knew that the ex-major, ex-chaplain, ex-reverend, recognized her qualities and was drawn by them.

"When I think of all the years I drank sherry," he said as he handed her a cocktail and got a refill for himself, "I feel I must work overtime to make up. . . . They sent me home marked PN, you know. That means psycho-neurotic—that you can't stand the gaff. But they're all PN over there—they have to be if they were at all decent to start with."

Marta felt an enormous pity for him. It welled up out of her eyes and flowed over him.

"My God," he said, sitting down edgeways so as to block them from the rest of the room and yet leave himself handy to Jack with the shaker, "you know I say that all the time now—just a phrase. . . . They sent me over there to be a spiritual aid to the boys. They didn't want spiritual aid, and quite right, too. I wrote their letters for them. They liked me. We were pals. And when they came back badly hurt, they sometimes held my hand and died—just died. Or sometimes they cursed and died." He pivoted around and came back with a full glass. "Once, though, a lad said to me, 'Was it all right what I did?' He was a machine gunner. They'd been strafing a supply line. You can see what happens when you're a machine gunner, it's not like dropping bombs. And he lay there and asked me, as if I knew, 'Was it all right what I did?' "

"What did you say?"

"What would you have said?"

His lean handsome face, the face of an ascetic or an actor, loomed close to hers. She recalled the fashionable parish in which he had drunk sherry and preached the word of God.

"Well?" The handsome sensitive face was growing irritable and she hastened with her answer.

"I think I would have said, It must be."

"You are a very wise woman—very wise and very beautiful."

"What did you say?" she urged him with a lovely gentleness.

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"I won't tell you what I said. But he laughed at me. That one laughed and died. . . . 'It must be'—I'll remember that—only I'll never need it. . . . Nobody'll ever ask me again if anything's all right. . . . And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll leave this delightful party and go and get really drunk."

"Oh, don't do that."

"You said that as if you really meant it. Will you take me home with you?"

"Yes, yes. That's a good idea. Come home and have supper with me and the children."

He burst out laughing. "Scrambled eggs and bedtime stories? I guess I'll stay here. You won't worry about me if I stay here?" He was still laughing uproariously as she fled out the front door.

When she got home she took a bath and put on a pair of slacks and an old shirt of Hervey's. She rinsed out her mouth with soda. The idea of liquor was vile to her, the idea of a cocktail party, the memory of that man. They ought to shoot people for lack of character—and she continued to feel him leering at her, laughing at her. "Herve, O Herve," she mourned, folding in on herself and gradually sinking to the floor. "O, Hervey."

When next they met, Jack eyed her humorously. "You left us in a hurry the other day."

She heard the mockery left over from an earlier conversation with Frannie. "Braithwaite must have given Marta a good scare, all right," she could hear him say. "She went out of here looking as if she'd been raped." And Frannie down her long nose, "Martie can be silly."

So, now she took her highball and said, "Your friend Braithwaite was getting a little out of hand. . . . Did he find a more congenial playmate?" Having established her awareness of facts in life, she sat back and went on indulgently, "He wanted, you see, to go home with me—and I offered him scrambled eggs and the boys." She looked them in the eyes with mannered innocence. "That didn't seem to be what he was after." And she felt safe again and one with them as their laughter veered around to the reverend's nakedness.

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3

"I have come back here from where I was," Stan wrote, "both places being military secrets. Only 'here' is supposed to be the most beautiful city in the world.

"I saw Hervey and he is well. You will see him soon. By the time you get this, he will be on his way home.

"Don't be worried by his getting leave—it was easy to do. He's all right. I just thought he needed to get home. He will have thirty days unencumbered and then will either be reassigned or may even be let out. Things are moving fast and you can't tell what will happen.

"Don't feel obligated to me. I would have done the same for a son or a stranger. I think you may get a pass to meet the ship. That I did do for you."

And still another paragraph, short yet lingering, as if he were rising to terminate an embarrassing interview. "Now don't worry. Plenty of men are getting leave. As I said in Cambridge, stay as you are and everything will be all right." Then, quickly, in relief and affection as he rang for the orderly,

"Next time I'll write about myself. My love to Gordon and all—God bless you—Stan."

Terror possessed her and as it passed she found herself gesturing feebly, smiling inanely, her body found out in its ignorance of expressions for great happiness. It was a long time before Stan's reassurances made her uneasy. If he wasn't hurt, if he wasn't PN (but he could never be like Braithwaite), why did he send him home? And why didn't Hervey write her, too? He had not even sent a message. But the orderliness of her mind was destroyed and such reasonable cogitations fell before the thought that Hervey was on his way.

"Your father is coming home," she said to the boys as if she were scolding them, and burst into tears.

"It'll be funny to have him back," Harry mused, remembering how it had been to have a man in the house and then the freedom of not having him.

"Does that mean the war is over?" Gordon asked.

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"No, dear—only maybe it will be over for us. He may not have to go back."

"But if the war isn't over, how can he stay?"

"I suppose you think he hasn't done enough."

"Oh, sure, sure."

"Will we all go to New York to meet him?" Harry asked.

"I don't know that he'll land in New York."

"But if he does?"

"No," she heard herself say. "If he lands in New York, I shall go down and meet him by myself. We may stay a week and have a good time. . . . It won't hurt you to wait a little longer."

They were scandalized by her treachery. "But Mom—"

"Don't call me Mom—and hang up your coats."

Tremble though she often did before their absolute disapproval, she held out against them. "It's Hervey's due," she told herself. "He's due for a little amusement." Too often in the past she had put the children before his pleasure. This time she would meet him ready for theaters and nightclubs. And at the last minute, thankful that she had remembered in time, she took an extravagant amount of money out of the bank and bought a nightgown. She had her resources, she thought, more than Frannie ever dreamed, more than Braithwaite—

And it was in no mood of wifely comradeship that, the night before the ship was to dock, she put on the nightgown and looked at herself in the strange mirror. She felt the unfamiliar pile of carpet beneath her feet, saw her hair dark and wild about her face. With unashamed yet bashful boldness, she looked below her face to note that her breasts were firm and high. Terror possessed her and passion crept like quicksilver between her thighs.

Stan's pass did not come through, so the next morning she left a message for Hervey to meet her at the hotel. She made herself eat a good breakfast and settled herself in the lobby with the morning paper and her knitting, determined to be calm. She placed herself sideways to the door and near it so he couldn't miss her, then slowly and painfully set herself to read each item

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while her hands worked fast and she wondered if he would be here soon and touch her on the shoulder. He had used sometimes to kiss her hair. She had not put on her hat. But he was so late that all imaginings slowly faded and mind and body froze in waiting, only the mechanic hands kept busy.

As she turned to ease the stiffness, she saw a big man in uniform cross the lobby. A kit dangled from his big hand. She forced herself to put the paper together and arrange the yarn, then walked swiftly after him and touched him just as he was about to enter the door. He turned defensively and then put out a hand. "I didn't see you," he murmured, his eyes lowered.

"But I was right there." She noticed that his hair was very gray and that he was much bigger than she remembered. His face seemed bigger. It hung over her like a dark moon. And though he was looking at her, his gaze enveloped so much that she wondered if he saw her at all.

He rubbed his hand over his face. "Yes, in all the hotels that I passed, you were there, weren't you?" As he spoke, he put his hand on her forehead and pushed back her head. Supposing that he wanted to kiss her, she moved her face a little towards him, but he held it off. "Oh, it was marvelous," he laughed, "in all the lobbies Marta glamorous and Marta drab with bright things in your hands. Skewers, I thought—taught to booby traps, you know—for the poor cock's lights and liver; or were they silver trout fish that we would slit and eat?" His hands on her shoulders, he gave her a little shake, laughing still though his fingers were painful in her flesh. "Come, tell dumb Hervey, Marthe—you always had an answer." Like a foreign beggar, he capered and besought, and also threatened.

Do you want me to laugh, she would have liked to say, do you want me to cry? Oh, Hervey, the weak desire piped, I am whatever you want. But she resolutely stifled the words. She must be strong for both, a soldier's wife. "People are looking," she whispered and shoved him gently.

His hands dropped quickly and his focus changed as if he had turned around binoculars and she were now far off from him,

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clear-cut and tiny. "Well," he said, rather loud and a little breathless, "well, shall we take a look at the town?"

"I left my hat upstairs," she said wistfully, blinking back the tears.

"I'll wait."

When she came down he was holding a sight-seeing pamphlet. "It shouldn't take more than a couple of days to clear with the army—so we might as well make the most of our time."

"I thought you might want to stay a little—see some plays, hear some music?"

"I want to see the boys. I met a pretty intelligent fellow on the ship said it would probably be a good thing if I could see them. . . . If it's O. K. by you?"

While a hatred for the children flared within her, she bowed her head and said, "Of course."

Pamphlet in hand they went to the top of the Empire State Building, through Rockefeller City. They went to the Battery and to Grant's tomb. He never suggested taking a taxi, but walked and used the subway, asking directions, making mistakes —a soft-faced man in a faded uniform accompanied by a worried, wearied woman. He's sick, she told herself, he's very sick. This is what Stan wanted to say and didn't know how to. So, though he suggested once or twice that it must all be very dull for her as well as tiring, she insisted on staying with him. And forced herself to suitable remarks: from the top of the Empire State Building, "You do get a fine view of the city, don't you?" At Grant's tomb, "What a pity to ruin a fine soldier by putting him in the White House."

"I'm tired," she said at last. "I can't walk any more." So he took her on long subway rides out to the suburbs; on busses up and down through Harlem and the Bronx until her mind was filled with sad tenements and parsimonious houses. And for these she had no words at all. All lights, all gaiety, all warmth and wealth were somewhere else and the great buildings of Manhattan towered irrelevantly above a mournful phantasmagoria.

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"What do you mean by it?" she cried as they ate supper in an automat. "Why are you doing this?"

"It occurred to me over there that I had never seen New York. . . . I'm sorry if I went too fast for you." There was always an apology in his voice, as if he were feeling his way with a stranger or an invalid. And he had not once looked directly at her since they left the hotel. After supper, they went to a newsreel, walked on Times Square for a little and returned exhausted to their beds. She hoped jealously of his meeting with the boys.

Of them he asked nothing, merely spoke their names gently and with formality. "There are no toys in France," he said as he handed them a three-year-old French comic, a paper-bound fairy tale. "This was all I could find for you." They thanked him gravely and politely inspected the pictures, without a word about the shell fragments, cartridge belts, canteens and German helmets they had counted on. Then they slid away from him and he never looked for them again, nor they for him. She noticed that they never called him *daddy,* but maneuvered so as to always to be able to say *you.* And as if they had been condemned by his rejection, she shoved them from herself as well, addressed them only in admonishment and took a malign pleasure in showing them the cold face of her duty until finally they ceased to look for her either. As the routine of necessary life closed over them, they glided, the one around the other, shut like fishes in the little house.

"It's Oolong, Hervey," she said with the forced brightness that she did not like but could not eradicate when she spoke to him. "The first in a long time." She had made the tea quickly to give her an excuse for going into the living room where he had turned off the radio and been quiet for a long time. She had a great fear of his doing nothing, though so far he had not moped nor been idle. He had cleaned the house for her; he had been glad to mend Gordon's sled. And every time she saw him intent on some job, she hoped that this was the solution. If friends

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were not the therapy indicated, nor children, nor wife, then maybe it was housework or carpentry. Perhaps tea? she seemed to hope as she put the cup down.

"Yes, of course," he said. "Oolong—you have done without it for a long time?" He bent over the table again, a book open before him.

"Do you like your old books, Hervey?"

"This is one of yours—'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for they shall see God'—what do you think that means, Marta?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"You used to read such—I thought perhaps—"

"Well, it's a long time now. And you really don't have to put yourself out so to be nice to me."

He looked down again. "I wasn't exactly—"

"What I don't see is why you came back at all."

He closed the book. "When a Colonel talks to you like a father, you do as he says. . . . But I grant he was right."

"I know it must have been very hard for you over there."

"Do you?" For a moment their eyes met and she stifled a cry at the void in his expression.

"But what are we going to do, Hervey?" she moaned. "Tell me—what—"

"I try to think—and then you shove or bring in tea or something," he mused absently. He fingered the book again but did not open it. "In the meantime," he came back to her, "I think it would be better if I made my bed in one of the boys' rooms—whichever you think best—or should we wait and consult them?"

"Take which you prefer. They can like it or not." She tried to find a handkerchief. "I don't mean to do this exactly now," she wept, "only I've been wanting to for a long time. . . . I remember you used to say that people cry only when they feel sorry for themselves." All the dear cruelties and sorrows of the past recurred and she cried openly and with all her heart.

"An enviable ability, in all events."

She observed the privacy of his room with scrupulous care.

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Once a week she gave him the mop and vacuum cleaner so that he might clean it, once a week asked for soiled clothes and linen. Though sometimes, in bed at night, she would determine to provoke a show-down the next day, when the moment came to break the silence, she didn't dare displease him. It was he who chose the meager subjects of their conversations. If she had been to a meeting, he would question her about the League of Women Voters. "On the contrary," he would say when she offered a doubt of the matter's interest for him, "it's all extremely interesting." She would have preferred not to go anywhere, but stay in the house where she could hear him moving in another room or wait for him to return from his infrequent excursions. But he familiarized himself with her normal calendar and made her follow it, suggested that it was time to entertain the Albrights, asked if she had written to Stan. "I want to interfere with your life just as little as possible," he explained. And she had not the courage to tell him that he was her life.

4

The snow had gone and the first mournfulness of spring was apparent in the air when Stan telephoned just as she was going to bed. He was at his sister's and wanted to pay a visit the next day. "I take it I'll see Hervey, too?" She said yes, while her throat tightened and she was barely able to invite him for tea.

She trudged heavily upstairs again. As if in a dream, she went to Hervey's door and knocked and entered slowly to his invitation. The bareness of the room was a comment on the rest of the house—if he had only told her, she would have stripped it all. Then she found his face, dark against the pillows, and stared at it for a long time, at his round anomalous face and full lips for a long time before she spoke.

"Stan just called and I told him to come to tea tomorrow. I can tell him not to come, if you prefer."

"Why, no . . . Just back, he should be interesting to talk to."

"I suppose there's a woman over there."

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He didn't hear her and she repeated the question, loudly and brutally, still staring at his face. "I say, I suppose there's a woman in France you're always thinking about."

"Well, now—what would you say constitutes a woman?" he inquired pleasantly.

"I'm not going to let you off that easily."

His face tightened and he bent his head to his book. She jabbed again. "What's she like? Young? Blonde?"

"Take off your nightgown," he said, sitting straighter. She took it off and dropped it on the floor beside her. "Now walk," he said. "Walk up and down . . . The same pace—not fast, not slow . . . Keep on walking." She thought it was unendurable, but every time she offered to stop he repeated, "Walk." She walked until she was aware of every portion of her body and finally lost all knowledge of it as she walked and turned and walked. Held in the anarchic gripe of shame and suffering, What am I doing? she thought occasionally, from far off. What will happen? What is happening now?

A groan, as from the very room, released her. Hervey had buried his face in the pillows and was sobbing with no effort at restraint. She stood beside the bed, her hands at her side. After a while she turned off the light and crept in, ready to be told to go, ready for him to beat her. And as he turned to her, her passion received one last ecstatic impulse as she recognized unfaithfulness to the earlier, the other Hervey.

Her limbs all grace, her features soft and glowing, she hummed a tune as she set her pretty teacups on the tray. When Hervey came in and leaned against the mantel, she snatched a glance at him. He too looked absolutely content, at home with himself. "I often think Stan's happier here than with his sister," she babbled joyfully. "He must often be very lonely—no wife—no family—"

Hervey grunted and she resumed her humming.

"Marta," he said gravely. She turned at his tone and saw his

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army kit dangling from his hand. "Marta, I'm going now. I want to go before Stan gets here." His face filled the room, luminous and removed as a full moon.

"Where are you going, Hervey?"

"On . . . You know, the American solution . . . Begging bowls seem a little foreign." How happily he mocked himself. "I'm a good mechanic."

"I supposed you were going back to teaching."

"What would I teach, Marta?"

She broke from the weakening lucidity of his gaze. "Listen," she cried, "try it. Try being as you were. Maybe you will forget —maybe I could help you—"

"And why, will you tell me, should I want to forget? When you're awake do you want to go back to sleep again?"

"Is it my fault?" Contentment made him look so deaf she had to yell. "Is it my fault if I haven't been stripped naked and turned inside out?"

"You understood that, didn't you?" He laughed lightheartedly. "You've really come to understand one small item." He had turned toward her, his hands on his hips, and as he spoke he jutted hands and pelvis at her mockingly. She backed quickly into her armchair and his laughter became immoderate.

"They have won, haven't they?" she said bitterly. "They have corrupted the world."

He was quickly serious and civil. "I think it's rather that they have exposed our own corruption . . . Or mine, at least. I daresay other people can listen to music, other people can read books. Other people can teach or make love . . . All my communications are corrupt . . . As you know."

"It is all I ask." He backed from her catapulted plunge and, in a tinkling spray of china, she fell on all fours, avid and unintelligible, at his feet.

"Marta. Marta." Throughout the dark convulsion, his cold and gentle voice informed her of her name. He helped her to her chair and stood by it for a moment, still murmuring. Then

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she heard a swoosh and clack as he brushed the broken cups into the ashes. And he waited by again while her body gradually relaxed, her head bowed and the blood came back to her knuckles. "May I leave you now?" he finally asked.

Farewell then, she said in her mind. Farewell, farewell, as she heard him move. Farewell, for she would not dare look up until he were well gone.

Life drained away with each soft footstep. But just before she died, she heard life ringing, ringing in her ears. She reached the kitchen and pulled Hervey round. "Just till he's gone," she begged. "Just that—I promise."

"Of course." He turned and followed her as if she had asked him to brush down the steps, to vacuum the rugs before he left. But she still held his arm tight as she opened to the martial and benevolent figure of Stan asking if he were much too early.

She laughed noisily and kissed him on the cheek. "Come in—come in—how wonderful. Come in—I'll get drinks." Clutching an arm of each, she shoved them into the living room and shut the door.

She reeled with the intoxication of reprieve. An hour gained from eternity—two, maybe, if Stan enjoyed himself, if she were gay and sparkling. She laughed over the ice cubes, smiled brilliantly at the glasses. Stan's voice flowed through the wall. "Yes, I'm going back . . . but the suburbs are practically untouched . . . my aide will hold it for me, or else." He would be sitting down, holding Hervey with his chatter. Hervey would be at the mantel, smiling. Hervey still in the house. ". . . and daughter, so grateful for the attic . . . really high class . . . suggests Marta." Though he had dropped his voice, it was too confident not to penetrate. "And of course, with these," he would be patting his stars while Hervey smiled and did not need to speak, but stayed.

The boys burst in at the back door and, seeing her, stopped short.

"Either come in or go out . . . What do you want?"

"Nothing," they mumbled.

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She picked up the tray. "Since you're here you might as well speak to Stan." Would they help to hold or would they bore him? "He's a Brigadier now," she added as they trailed dispiritedly behind her. "Hervey," she cried, proud of her calm voice. Oh, she would be gay. "Hervey, have you congratulated Stan?"

"He hasn't had a chance. I've been talking his head off . . . But it's he who's due for congratulation. I've never seen you looking so well, my boy . . . Quite a change from a few months ago, eh, Marta? Just look at him."

"Yes, I know." She knew too well to look, she knew too well the remote benignancy of Hervey leaning on the mantel performing this last chore before departure. "Here, Hervey," she said with lowered eyes, "let's drink to Stan."

"Here's to us all . . . And now," Stan directed the boys, "go out on the porch and you'll find a box there . . . But first I've got something for your mother."

Hervey serene above, the rest crowded around while she opened the flat worn jewel box. Within was a delicate gold necklace set with diamonds or brilliants. Even the boys were dazzled. "Put it on, put it on."

It was the most beautiful thing she had ever had in her hands. Standing so close to Hervey that she had to be careful not to touch him she observed how her whole throat borrowed an opulence from its glow, how it made her old housecoat look like a ball gown. *Zwei herzen im drei vierte tach* hummed through her head and she knew the desperate gaiety of heroines.

"I sent my aide," Stan was saying, "it wouldn't quite have done for me—with, with a little German girl I'd met. She picked well, don't you think? But very expensive, Marta. One whole carton of cigarettes!" He laughed for all of them. "I said I wanted something elegant, distinguished . . . You don't mind my giving your wife jewels, do you, Hervey? . . . It just suits her, doesn't it? . . . And now for you youngsters—open the box, boys. My orderly, nice young chap . . . Open her up, now . . . I told him to get small sizes. He took a great interest . . . And get things

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that looked used, I told him, I know boys." He pulled out a helmet with a jagged hole in the lower left side. "Well, who wants this?" as the boys' hands shot up.

"Don't touch it—please." The command so quickly cleared the room of noise that it was a moment before they realized that anyone had spoken. "It's dirty," Hervey added negligently.

She saw Harry's head cock to one side as if he would, for a moment, have rebelled. Then he lowered his arms stiffly and looked at his father. Gordon put his hands in his pockets. Their faces slowly glowed, two small reflective moons just rising. And while deep lines strained his face to anguish and his face grayed, Hervey stared and stared at them.

"Nonsense—they've been well scrubbed and saddle-soaped." Stan laid down the helmet and pulled out a belt. "There's nothing to fear." But Harry was smiling at his father while Gordon examined the contents of his pockets. "What's come over you all, anyway? . . . Hervey, I always knew you were peculiar, but I must say . . . Well," as even Marta gave no help, "about time for me to go."

"Marta," he said in guarded tones when they were in the hall, "are you all right here?"

She flung her arms around his neck. "You've made me the happiest woman in the world," she whispered, and pushed him out the door.

Hervey was alone in the twilit room, at ease in the big chair as he had not been since his return, as he had so often used to be. She backed away from the door to regain control over the joy that broke over her and churned and battered. I must be perfectly casual, she told herself. When she was certain that her voice would be clear of both humility and triumph, she made her entrance and remarked, "I suppose I might as well put away your kit?"

"Yes?" He roused himself a little and, picking up the helmet from the table, revolved it idly between his hands. "Yes, if you wish. Thanks."

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She sat down opposite him and arranged her skirt to graceful folds. "Hervey," she said with gentle solemnity. "Hervey." She cleared her throat. Then a tenderly indulgent smile irradiated her face as she took off the necklace and, with a lovely offering gesture, leaned a little forward. There were real tears in her eyes, the smile and the tenderness were implicit in her voice, "Hervey."

"Hervey!" But the scream, the word even died in her throat. He had crossed his legs and settled back more comfortably, the helmet poised high between his fingertips. From where she was the dark compacted mass now totally eclipsed his face.

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# *Two Poems*

*HOWARD NEMEROV*

## A Poem of Margery Kempe

I creature being mad
They locked me in my room,
Where, bound upon the bed
With smiling Satan there,
I would have broke my side
And given the heart to God.
Men said it was pride
Brought me to that despair.

*Alas! that ever I did sin,*
*It is full merry in heaven.*

The priest so angered me
That I would not confess.
I suffered his reproof
Scornefully, for my God
(I said) has mercy enough.
His kingdom I see
And Lucifer his rod
In my wretchedness.

*Alas! that ever I did sin,*
*It is full merry in heaven.*

When I recovered reason
I would have lived chaste,
And mocking my husband's right
I for a little season
Kept me for the sweet Christ,
Who said to me, "Dear Bride,
"Rather the good man's lust
"Than this dry pride."

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*Alas! that ever I did sin,*
*It is full merry in heaven.*

But I, except in bed,
Wore hair-cloth next the skin,
And nursed more than my child
That grudge against my side.
Now, spirit and flesh assoild,
Against the wild world
I lace my pride in,
Crying out odd and even,

*Alas! that ever I did sin,*
*It is full merry in heaven.*

## Madrigal

She is the darkness where I wander
Who was the light that found my way.
What time and choice have torn asunder
Come together in no day.

Blackness her great beauty bringeth
Upon me, and I go my way
Singing as one lonely, that singeth
Unregarding and astray.

Night time on her also is fallen,
Shadow clouds her perfect way.
For her the winter sun rides sullen
And shines not on the dark day.

To such a year no springtime riseth,
Nor is no excellence in May,
But darkness in the sky abideth
Where the world wanders astray.

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# *The Life Of Our Design*

*ALAN S. DOWNER*

THE FUNCTION OF IMAGERY IN THE POETIC DRAMA

*Why, there you touch'd the life of our design.*
(*Troilus and Cressida, II,* 2, 194.)

IN DISCUSSING POETIC DRAMA one has to begin with a number of negative generalizations: there is no such thing; there once was such a thing; it is a lost art, though not necessarily a dead one. Perhaps it is dormant because it has been defined as if it were a joining of two elements, poetry and drama, when actually it is only one: poetic drama. That is, it will not be resurrected by a poet, like Byron or Stephen Phillips, writing a play, or by a playwright, like Sheridan Knowles or Maxwell Anderson, trying to write a poem. Poetic drama must be written by dramatic poets. If the truism is chiastic, truth yet lies in the figure.

But if the definition of poetic drama is schismatic, so too is its criticism and analysis. In Miss Bradby's fascinating and infuriating little anthology of *Shakespeare Criticism,* 1919-1935, the critical lines are drawn: on the one side is the Shakespeare-as-a-dramatist brigade commanded by Granville-Barker and J. Isaacs; on the other, Shakespeare-as-a-poet, better equipped and manned, and officered by Spurgeon and Murry and G. Wilson Knight. The strange thing about this general confrontation of critical armies is that although the roll is taken on each side, and all are present and as fully armed as possible, no attempt seems to be made to join battle. Mr. Barker will occasionally take issue in a footnote with Professor Bradley, and a junior officer like Eric Bentley speak a few ill-mannered words about the enemy, but nothing conclusive ever happens. Not a shot is fired, not an attempt is made to storm the barricades, or on the other hand to

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sign a treaty of friendship and mutual aid. It is as if each side felt that something too precious to risk might be involved in either engagement or compromise. As a consequence, both sides are impoverished, and the neutrals uneasily trade with both at once in a state of utter uncertainty. Yet Union is possible with Honor and without Compromise; and it could stem from a recognition of the true nature of poetic drama.

The drama is a unique form of expression in that it employs living actors to tell its story; its other aspects—setting, characters, dialogue, action and theme—it shares with other forms of communication. But the fact that the dramatist is not dealing with characters merely, but with three-dimensional persons is paralleled by the fact that he is not dealing with a setting verbally described but three-dimensionally realized, with action that actually occurs in time and space, with dialogue which is spoken by human voices for the human ear: so many tools, so many tribulations. One of the very real problems of the dramatist is just this, that he, unlike the poet, must deal with the thingness of things; to him a mossy stone must be a mossy stone and a ship tossed on an ocean a ship tossed on an ocean, not a synonym for *peace* or *turmoil.* But the point is, surely, that for the poetic dramatist the stone is more than a stone without ever losing its stoniness, and the tempest may be a highly symbolic one without losing its reality. So, although the drama in general makes considerable use of physical objects—"props"—to tell its story, the higher drama transmutes the physical prop into a symbol, gaining richer meaning without expansion. The poetic drama relates the dramatic symbol to the poetic image, intensifying the unity of the work, and gaining still greater richness without greater bulk, compression being the ever-present necessity of the form.

It is my present purpose to examine the function of imagery in poetic drama, the language of poetry, and its relation to the essentially dramatic devices which might be similarly named the language of props, the language of setting, and the language of action. In the interests of communication I have chosen most of my illustrations from Shakespeare.

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The more perceptive of the poetic critics have recognized the existence of this dramatic language, if they have refused to see its true relation to the verbal. Coleridge, for example: "Shakespeare as a poet was providing in images a substitute for that visual language which in his dramatic works he got from his actors." The definition of action as visual language is so illuminating that one wonders why Coleridge did not see by its flash the limitation of the earlier portion of his statement.

In the same chapter of the *Biographia Literaria* he gives the cue to most of his successors: the poetic power, he declares, consists in part of "reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling." In particular this inspired Caroline Spurgeon in her counting and analysis of Shakespeare's images to determine, where possible, the "iterative images" of the plays. Using *image* broadly to cover every kind of simile and metaphor, she produced a documented and be-graphed volume which is the happy hunting ground of the anti-theatrical critics. Miss Spurgeon, however, felt that the results of her study could be used as a more general tonic. In her estimation the iterative image is a revelation of the writer's personality, temperament and quality of mind, and it throws fresh light on individual plays by serving as Background and Undertone, raising and sustaining emotion, providing atmosphere, and emphasizing a theme. It reminds one of the old patent medicines which cured everything from sterility to toothache. From her analysis, for instance, Miss Spurgeon concludes that Shakespeare was more sensitive to the horror of bad odors than to the allure of fragrant ones, and to the loathsomeness of bad cooking than to appreciation of delicate and good, presumably because he had "more opportunity of experiencing the one than the other." There is no other evidence that Miss Spurgeon had a sense of humor.

On the other hand, her extended discussion of the martlet image in *Macbeth* very nearly penetrates to the heart of Shakespeare's dramatic technique. The martlet is a foolish bird and Banquo notices him on Macbeth's castle:

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*no jutty, frieze,*
*Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird*
*Hath made his bed and procreant cradle.*

Martlet was a slang word for dupe, like the word gull; that is, a metaphor. But in the *Macbeth* scene the bird is imagined to be present as part of the "setting," and therefore becomes, not a poetic image, but a dramatic symbol, of the "guest who is to be 'fooled'." Into dramatic symbolism, even when it is so intimately linked with the poetic imagery of the play, Miss Spurgeon will not go. She is, for instance, rather annoyed at the gardener's scene in *Richard II* because "no human gardeners ever discoursed like these," though she recognizes its importance in, as she says, "gathering up, focussing and pictorially presenting," the leading theme of the play.

The other school of modern interpretation of Shakespeare is perhaps best represented by Granville-Barker's essay on *King Lear*, in which he restores the play to the stage and demonstrates that it is essentially theatrical. "The whole scheme and method of its writing is a contrivance for its effective acting. The contrast and reconciliation of grandeur and simplicity, this setting of vision in terms of actuality, this inarticulate passion which breaks now and again into memorable phrases—does not even the seeming failure of expression give us a sense of the helplessness of humanity pitted against higher powers? All the magnificent art of this is directed to one end; the play's acting in a theater." The reactions to this kind of statement are violent and equally dogmatic—mere theatricalism, declared one reviewer.

It is surely too late to go around saying that *King Lear* is not adapted to theatrical representation. Is it not also too late to declare that poetic drama cannot reveal its meaning and depth and implications on the stage as fully as any other work of art in its own medium?

In seeing Shakespeare on the modern stage, we take immediate pleasure in the story and a secondary pleasure in the characterization. But certain critical writers have suggested that there is a

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third and more important pleasure—the meaning as interpreted by the interplay of images. Since we are reasonably deaf to spoken poetry, it would seem that this is a pleasure reserved, as the critics suggest, for the study. Aside from the fact that this makes Shakespeare look a little foolish, like a composer who writes a quartet to be performed by a one-armed violinist, is it true? I believe that it is not; that Shakespeare, if he began as two characters, the Poet and the Playwright, managed to unite them somehow as the Poetic Dramatist; if he began by using the language of action *and* the language of poetry he soon learned to use the language of *imagery in action* which is the major characteristic of poetic drama.

Perhaps the theatricalist and the reader of poetry can find common ground in a consideration of dramatic symbolism. At any rate, in this subject there is less excuse for the automatic or reflex sneer at the other's expense, since symbolism is as basic to drama as imagery is to poetry.

Symbolism grows naturally out of the materials of the drama. The successful unravelling of the plot dilemma in a Greek tragedy or a Roman comedy frequently depended upon the manipulation of some physical object, some prop, a piece of cloth, a footprint, a birthmark, a chest. In the more intricate popular drama of the last century, a cache of gold, a missent letter, a list of conspirators might be the mainspring of the action. In such plays, however, one tires very quickly of the mere ingenuity by which the eventual discovery of the gold, or arrival of the letter is held off.

It was a considerable step up the ladder of dramatic interest and intensity in the nineteenth century when Ibsen discovered that the game of "pistol-pistol-who's-got-the-pistol" could not only make a fascinating plot but could suggest the relation of the action to some aspect of the experience of the audience. When Hedda Gabler produces a case of pistols at the beginning of her play, it is basic dramatic economy that she should give one to Lövborg to commit suicide with, and use the other to put an end to her own wretched life. Further, it is nicely ironic. But when the point is carefully made that these pistols are her sole

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material heritage from General Gabler, a parallel avenue of suggestion is opened. She has inherited her personal characteristics from the old general, and the pistols are symbols, not only of the spiritual heritage but of the order which shaped it—the empty, decadent life of the military caste. At the end of the play it is clear that Hedda's environment and heredity shaped all her actions, drove her to urge Lövborg's suicide and finally caused her own death. The pistols are not merely the means of the action, but the meaning of the action.

Lest it be objected that such an interpretation of a dramatic symbol stems from the study rather than the stage, a current example may be added. One of the earliest and sturdiest of the successes of the 1947-1948 season on Broadway was William Wister Haines's *Command Decision*. There is no pretense about this play: it is a tightly constructed, efficient product, intended for the open market. Yet despite its employment of stereotypes, conventions, and elements of melodrama, the audience is caught up in the movement of the play: we who have usually been asked to worry only about the problems of the doughboy and GI Joe, are suddenly emotionally involved in the problems of majors and brigadier-generals, hitherto satirized or portrayed as villains.

The action takes place in a Nissen hut, headquarters of an airforce command in England. The setting is narrow: the back wall, only a few feet from the footlights, is papered with a huge geodetic survey map of Western Europe. Throughout most of the performance, this map is covered, the curtains being withdrawn only when it is necessary to explain current operations. At such times the audience sees the major target cities to be destroyed and the pitifully short arc of fighter cover. The decision, which the title reflects, is whether the destruction of the targets warrants the certain loss of American soldiers.

These soldiers, whose lives are at stake, and who would be the main concern of the conventional war play or film, we never see. We see only the men whose responsibility it is to send them out and who are popularly supposed to die in bed. Yet humanity is never remote. The whole world of the action is brought into the

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Nissen hut; each revelation of the map creates increasing tension. At its first showing, it is merely expository: this is where we must operate. At its second, it begins to become symbolic: this is the awful dilemma which presses upon the leading character. Finally, it symbolizes the underlying meaning of the play; the desperate nature of any decision for any man under competing pressures. The map as symbol enables the audience to participate in the emotional tension of the play, serves as a unifying force, and reveals the deeper significance of what might all too easily have been a routine piece of theatrical journalism. It is, further, the best kind of dramatic symbol in that it is never obtrusive, being equally germane to the action and the theme.

It may very well be that Mr. Haines stumbled upon this dramatic symbol quite unconsciously. There is nothing in his work as a novelist to indicate that he is particularly concerned with form in that medium. His experience in Hollywood working with a medium which deals largely and conventionally in visual symbols may have led him unawares to the device. The point is that the device is there for the use of the most prosaic dramatist and it serves to enrich his work by requiring the mechanical aspects of the play to do double duty.

This "language of props" is equivalent to the simpler uses of imagery in poetry, but it can become highly complex in the poetic drama. For the sake of familiarity, if for no other reason, one turns to Shakespeare for illustration. Since it is, however, somewhat unfair to the authors of both works to juxtapose *Richard II* and *Command Decision*, a contemporary of Shakespeare's may be used as bridge and buffer. The simpler uses of dramatic symbolism in the poetic drama are clearly exhibited in the first part of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. The Scythian tyrant is obsessed with the idea of power as symbolized in the "sweet fruition of an earthly crown." It is not surprising that the crown—a commonplace symbol, wholly apart from its use in the drama—figures largely in the action.

In the first scene, Cosroe is crowned emperor. In the second act, foolish Mycetes rushes on stage seeking to hide his crown in a simple hole. Tamburlaine overtakes him:

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Tam. *Is this your crown?* (Taking it)
Myc. *Ay, didst thou ever see a fairer?* (Relinquishing it)
Tam. (Ironically) *You will not sell it, will you?*
Myc. *Such another word and I will have thee executed. Come, give it me!*
Tam. *No, I took it prisoner.*
Myc. *You lie; I gave it you.*
Tam. *Then, 'tis mine.*
Myc. *No, I mean I let you keep it.*
Tam. *Well, I mean you shall have it again. Here, take it for a while: I lend it thee, Till I may see thee hemmed with armed men; Then shalt thou see me pull it from thy head: Thou art no match for mighty Tamburlaine.*

Later, as Cosroe dies, Tamburlaine puts on his crown; a banquet of crowns is introduced; and the play ends with the triumphant crowning of Zenocrate. Throughout all this action, the symbol remains as simple as possible—verbalized, the crown stands for "perfect bliss" and "sole felicity," its

*virtues carry with it life and death;*
*To ask and have, command and be obeyed.*

The crown is the symbol of the king's rank, the ruler's god-like power.

The crown which is handled so dramatically in the deposition scene of *Richard II* is, to be sure, the symbol of the king's rank. But it is not simply the sole felicity in which Tamburlaine displayed such interest. It is the symbol of the condition of England, as in the words of Gaunt:

*A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown*
*Whose compass is no bigger than thy head;*
*And yet, incaged in so small a verge,*
*The waste is no whit lesser than thy land.*

And Northumberland proposes to "Redeem from broking pawn

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the blemish'd crown." Further, it is the symbol of Richard as actor:

> *within the hollow crown*
> *That rounds the mortal temples of a king*
> *Keeps death his court; and there the antic sits,*
> *Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp;*
> *Allowing him a breath, a little scene,*
> *To monarchize. . . .*

It is a symbol of that "divinity doth hedge a king":

> *For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd*
> *To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown*
> *God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay*
> *A glorious angel. . . .*

The divinity which the crown symbolizes is strengthened by a second image, the king as the sun:

> *knowst thou not*
> *That when the searching eye of heaven is hid*
> *Behind the globe, that lights the lower world,*
> *Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen. . . .*
> *But when from under this terrestrial ball*
> *He fires the proud tops of the Eastern pines. . . .*
> *Then murthers, treasons, and detested sins,*
> *The cloak of night being pluck'd from off their backs,*
> *Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?*
> *So when this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke,*
> *Who all this while hath revell'd in the night*
> *Whilst we were wand'ring in th'Antipodes,*
> *Shall see us rising in our throne, the East,*
> *His treasons will sit blushing in his face,*
> *Not able to endure the sight of day,*
> *But self-affrighted tremble at his sin.*

The image is extended and explicit. Even the dullest in the audience must have been impressed by it. At any rate, Bolingbroke is not slow to seize upon it:

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*See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,*
*As doth the blushing discontented sun*
*From out the fiery portal of the east. . . .*

At this moment (III, 3) Richard is standing upon the walls of Flint Castle, which is to say the upper stage, and Bolingbroke is on the ground. At the end of the scene in response to his opponent's demands, Richard descends to the main stage, with still another reference to the sun image:

*Down, down I come like glist'ring Phaeton,*
*Wanting the manage of unruly jades. . . .*

He sees himself no longer as king, but an unsuccessful pretender to the title.

The climax of the action of the play, in which the complexity of the image is finally revealed, is the deposition of Richard. In the drama, the whole Parliament is assembled, with the lords and bishops of England providing not only a larger audience for the display of Richard's theatrical talents, but a more impressive background for the action. When the great moment comes, Richard makes the most of it, in a scene which should be compared with Tamburlaine's taking and returning of Mycetes' crown.

*Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown.*
(As Bolingbroke hesitates) *Here, cousin,*
(A pause; Bolingbroke steps to him, and Richard holds the crown between them)
*on this side my hand, and on that side yours.*
*Now. is this golden crown like a deep well*
*That owes two empty buckets,*

and so on. How carefully Shakespeare has pointed the action here; not simply a passing of the crown from one hand to the other, but a tableau, and an extended simile to illustrate it. So the visual symbolic exchange of the crown, to quote Miss Spurgeon's words on another matter, "gathers up, focusses and pictorially presents" the downfall of a man whose nature was ill-suited to kingship, and who has to some extent come to realize the fact.

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There are striking uses of this "language of props," the realization of the verbal image in dramatic terms, in later Shakespearean tragedy. For example, in *Macbeth* Miss Spurgeon found repeated iteration in the dialogue of the idea of ill-fitting clothes. Mr. Cleanth Brooks has related the image somewhat more closely to the play by seeing it as an interpretation of Macbeth's position as usurper: he is uncomfortable in garments not his own. Actually, the image suggests disguise. Macbeth is an unhappy hypocrite who declares before the murder of Duncan, "False face must hide what the false heart doth know," and before the murder of Banquo, "We must . . . make our faces vizards to our hearts, disguising what they are."

But the image is more than a mere verbal one. It is *realized*, made visual in the action of the play.

The first four scenes are various moments during and after a battle. In them, Macbeth will naturally be wearing his warrior's costume, his armor, as much a symbol of his nature and achievements as is Duncan's crown. When he defeats Norway, for instance, he is "lapped in proof," but when Ross and Angus greet him as Thane of Cawdor, he protests, "Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?" The image continues, verbally, as Banquo observes, half-jesting,

> *New honors come upon him*
> *Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold*
> *But with the aid of use.*

Under pressure from his wife, however, he resolves to seize the kingship, to cover his warrior's garments and the golden opinions that went with them with the clothing that was properly Duncan's. The murder is committed with constant reference in the dialogue to the clothing image (skilfully interpreted by Mr. Brooks) and the scene as marked in the Folio ends with the flight of Macbeth and his Lady from the crime as she urges him to

> *Get on thy nightgown, lest occasion call us*
> *And show us to be watchers.*

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When next Macbeth enters he is wearing his dressing gown, and if the actor is wise it will be such a gown as calls attention to itself, for at this point the change in costume, the disguising of the armor, dramatizes both the change in Macbeth's nature and the iterated poetic image. From now until nearly the end of the play, Macbeth is cowardly, melancholic, suspicious, and unhappy; the reverse of all the qualities that had made him the admired warrior of the early scenes. He cannot buckle his distempered cause within the belt of rule; and Macduff's fear is prophetic, "Adieu, lest our old robes sit easier than our new," prophetic not only for the unhappy Scots, but for Macbeth himself.

One of the achievements of this highly skilful play is the maintaining of interest in, if not sympathy for, the central figure; assassin, evil governor, usurper, and murderer. Shakespeare maintains this interest not merely by portraying Macbeth as a man in the control of wyrd, or too susceptible to uxorial suggestion, but, I think, by making us constantly aware of the armor—the honest warrior's nature—under the loosely hanging robes of a regicide. Until Act II, scene 3, Macbeth is quite possibly dressed as a warrior. From that point, until Act V, scene 3, he is dressed in his borrowed robes. But in the latter scene, with his wife eliminated as a motivating force, and with the English army moving against him, he begins to resume some of his former virtues: his courage returns, his forthrightness, his manliness. "Give me my armor," he cries, and in a lively passage with the Doctor, he makes grim jests about the power of medicine as Seyton helps him into his warrior's dress. He is all impatience to be back at the business he understands as he does not understand government:

Macbeth *Give me my armour.*
Seyton. *'Tis not needed yet.*
Macbeth. *Give me my armour.*
*Send out moe horses, skirr the country round;*
*Hang those that talk of fear. Give me mine armour. . . .*
*Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it!—*

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*Come put mine armour on. Give me my staff.—*
*Seyton, send out.—Doctor, the thanes fly from me.—*
*Come, sir, despatch.—If thou couldst, doctor, cast*
*The water of my land, find her disease,*
*And purge it to a sound and pristine health,*
*I would applaud thee to the very echo,*
*That should applaud again.—Pull't off, I say.—*

The tragic fall of this good man is dramatically underlined in his attempts to resume his old way of life. His infirmity of purpose cannot be more strongly presented than in his donning and doffing of the armor, and his bragging exit, with the equally revealing order:

*Bring it after me!*

This is not an isolated, but only a more complex use of costume as symbol in poetic drama. For subtlety it might be contrasted with the costume changes of Tamburlaine, who, appearing first in his shepherd's weeds, casts them off contemptuously at his first triumph:

*Lie here ye weeds that I disdain to wear!*
*This complete armour and this curtle axe*
*Are adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine;*

and who later wears in sequence white, scarlet, and black armor to indicate the stiffening of his attitude towards his victims. This is a simple dramatic device. In *Macbeth* the costume change is related to the iterated image to make concrete Macbeth's state of mind, and related also to the larger problem, the power of evil to corrupt absolutely, with which the play is concerned.

Without insisting too strongly on this kind of relation of image and symbol to clothe the idea of the play in reality, a few familiar instances may make the process clearer. *Hamlet*, for example, establishes in its opening scene, with the ghost, and the references to decay and unwholesomeness, what Mr. Knight calls "the embassy of death." The hand of death is upon the play from the very

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start and references to it are constantly reiterated. However, it is death of a particular sort, not just Hamlet's musings upon the possibilities of suicide. Hamlet speaks of the sun breeding "maggots in a dead dog," the king compares his nephew to a foul disease, and describes his subjects as "muddied, Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers." The idea is repeated over and over in the play which has been made explicit at the very start, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

But if we have missed it through insensitivity, Shakespeare presents his symbol of the state of Denmark dramatically, in terms of the theater, before our eyes: *Enter two clowns,* who discourse learnedly of death and suicide and toss skulls and bones about the stage remarking on the pocky corpses they now must deal with; "Faith, if 'a be not rotten before 'a die," catches up the very word Marcellus had used earlier to describe the condition of the state.

It is this same kind of symbolism that Miss Spurgeon noticed with some surprise in the Gardener's scene of *Richard II,* in which the "leading theme . . . (is) gathered up, focussed, and pictorially presented." As she points out, this could hardly be missed by any careful reader. The lines of the play are larded with images of nature gone awry, the ugly clouds flying in the fair and crystal sky, the flourishing branch cracked and hacked down, and the summer leaves faded; there is a fearful tempest, a flood tide;

> *The bay trees in our country all are withered,*
> *And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;*
> *The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth. . . .;*

an unseasonable stormy day causes rivers to flood. But where the other characters of the play refer to the disordered political conditions in England in terms of unkempt nature, the Gardener reverses them by comparing the task of ordering his garden to the task of the governor of a commonwealth.

> O *what pity it is*
> *That he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land*
> *As we this garden!*

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Miss Spurgeon declares the scene to have been "deliberately inserted at the cost of any likeness to nature, for no human gardeners ever discoursed like these." To demand verisimilitude in what is obviously a poetic device is to apply to Shakespeare the standards of David Belasco. Probably even the most theatrical of theatricalists would be willing to grant the rightness and the effectiveness of the device, for it does realize dramatically and visually in terms of character and action the theme of the play. On reconsideration it may seem over-deliberate, super-imposed, introducing as it does two totally new characters for the sole purpose of the device, but Shakespeare had not yet learned dramatic economy. In *Hamlet*, the gravediggers belong to the plot as well as to the imagery.

The repeated pictures of natural conditions in *Richard II* introduce a second important function of the image in Elizabethan poetic drama. We are all convinced, I suppose, that the dramatist was forced to work without the benefit or encumbrance of representational scenery, and that the formal nature of the background of the Globe is the excuse for so many of those

*Barkloughly Castle call they this at hand*

speeches, and such more extended and always (on the modern stage) intrusive passages in which we are informed,

*The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night,*
*Check'ring the Eastern clouds with streaks of light,*

together with other meteorological data. But perhaps the Elizabethan playwright was more fortunate than his cabined, cribbed and confined successor. Not only could he shift his scene at will, or indeed not bother with a "scene" at all, but he could in his images create a world for his action more complete than any producer could provide, and uniquely adapted to the needs of both his play and his theme.

In *Richard*, for example, the action transpires not before painted seacoasts and cardboard castles, but in an envelope which is at once scenic and emotional. The cumulative effect of the na-

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ture images is not merely to suggest the political condition of England, but the kind of world in which such a conflict as that between Bolingbroke and Richard could take place. The device is is not very skillfully used, perhaps, for *Richard* is close to being an apprentice play. In the later works, the setting as an emotional envelope is more artfully handled.

*Lear* is a case in point and a particularly striking contrast to *Richard*. Instead of giving magnitude to his action (as in the other tragedies) by relating the struggles of the protagonist to affairs of state, in England, Rome, or Denmark, Shakespeare creates a world of his own, a special world of King Lear, and he creates it by means of imagery.

It is the worst of all possible worlds. The animals which inhabit it are dragons, curs, rats, geese, kites, wolves, vultures, tigers. It is a world of disease, of plagues, carbuncles, boils. Whatever happens in this world happens in the most violent manner, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, broken on the rack. All this has been noted before by Miss Spurgeon and others. The world of Lear is a world of torment, a world unfriendly to man. In such a world the events of the play are entirely natural, possible, logical. The imagery, better than any possible stage setting, provides a background for the action, enriching the language of the play and serving to unify its execution.

For what, strangely enough, does not seem to have been commented on is the realization of this metaphorical world in the action of the play, in the tempest which runs through its center and in the torturing and blinding of Gloucester. Both scenes have come in for critical attack as incapable of presentation or too horrible for effective use. But it is clear that both are as essential to the play's action as to its theme, and that the blinding of Gloucester—detailed as it is—is made as horrible as possible for a purpose. If we experience an emotion of disgust, or terror, it is because both elements are present, not simply in the action, but in the world of the play. It is the dramatization of the image which makes the meaning of the play evident. If Richard's

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crown is the "language of props," Lear's tempest is the "language of setting."

The most difficult of the dramatist's devices to appreciate in the study is his primary device, the "language of action." Our modern playwrights are at some pains to render the action clear in extended stage directions, separated from the dialogue by italics and parentheses. Now Shakespeare resorts to a stage direction only rarely, most of the movement in his plays being implicit in the poetry. The significance of this lies less in the freedom of interpretation permitted the actor than in the indication of a further unity between the devices of poetry and the theater in the poetic drama.

For a simple and clear instance of this we may again turn to *Richard II*. The plot of this play, the conflict between Richard and Bolingbroke, might be diagrammed by tracing the letter X and letting the downward stroke stand for the king, the upward for the usurper, and the point of crossing the deposition scene. It is curious to note how the dominance of first the king and then the usurper is symbolized in their positions on the stage as well as in the imagery and the plot line. For three acts, Richard is in the ascendant. Whatever Bolingbroke's activities, Richard maintains his position as king. This is indeed symbolized by his appearance "on the walls" of Flint Castle, while Bolingbroke and his followers remain below. His descent to Bolingbroke's level is accompanied by a punning speech:

> *Base court, where kings grow base,*
> *To come at traitors' calls and do them grace;*

but his recognition of the true state of affairs is indicated as Bolingbroke kneels and Richard raises him up. In the deposition scene the shift in positions is completed, and verbalized by Richard in a final allusion to the sun image:

> *O that I were a mockery king of snow,*
> *Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke*
> *To melt myself away in water drops.*

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It is a sign of the maturing artist that as his skill increases in each of the dramatic forms he elects to try, Shakespeare relies more and more upon the essentially dramatic materials available to him, the actors, their movements and physical relationships. In the most perfect of the histories, for instance, *1 Henry IV*, he has involved himself in a highly complex plot, the handling of which is a constant source of wonder and admiration. Ostensibly, Shakespeare is relating the events of a portion of the reign of Henry IV, a revolt engineered by the Percy family, and the waywardness of the Prince of Wales. But the two problems confronting the king are brought into significant relationship to one another, and the facts of history are made to serve the purposes of art. The subject of the play is not English history, but the general education of princes. Events have been so modified that the play actually confronts two ways of life—Hotspur's and Falstaff's —and presents the dilemma of Hal in choosing between them. Although a good deal of ink has been spilled over the character of Falstaff, and a number of romantic female tears over Percy, Shakespeare's intention is clear from his manipulation of the characters in a crucial scene. In Act V, Scene 4, Douglas enters, challenges Henry IV, they fight and, "*the King being in danger, enter Prince of Wales.*" One must perhaps visualize the scene in the Elizabethan theater—a broad platform projecting into the audience with entrance doors on each side at the rear. Douglas and the Prince fight, and "*Douglas flieth*" through one of the doors. As the King goes to join his troops, enter, through the opposite door, Hotspur. The two youths exchange challenges; "*They fight.*"

> Enter Falstaff.
>
> Falstaff. *Well said, Hal! to it, Hal! Nay you shall find no boy's play here, I can tell you.*
>
> Enter Douglas. He fighteth with Falstaff, who falls down as if he were dead. (Exit Douglas.) The Prince killeth Percy.

Percy dies, still prating romantically of his honor and his proud

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titles which now accrue to Hal; Hal speaks his eulogy and turns from the body to go to the nearest door. But on his way, "*He spieth Falstaff on the ground.*" As in *Richard II* the positions of the characters in the scene are symbolic. Hal has, seemingly, been presented with a choice between the way of life represented by Hotspur and the way of life represented by Falstaff. And here they are, two (apparent) corpses on the ground, one on either side of him. The choice is to make, and he chooses—neither. Having bid farewell to Percy, he now bids farewell to Jack, confirming the promise of his first soliloquy and anticipating the rejection of Falstaff at the end of Part II.

Significant illustrations of this "language of action" could be chosen from nearly any of the plays. Indeed, nearly all the most familiar, most memorable scenes involve some kind of symbolic action. Not merely in tragedy, with Lear buffeted by the tempest, or Hamlet leaping into the grave of Ophelia, but in comedy, with Titania fondly caressing the hairy snout of ass-headed Bottom, or Feste torturing Malvolio into a realization of his humanity. The very essence of the tragic idea of *Hamlet* and *Lear* and the comic idea of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* is contained in those moments of action. This is not to say that the poetry is superfluous. These are further instances of the complete welding of the elements of poetry and the elements of theater which constitute successful poetic drama.

With rare exceptions English poets and English playwrights have gone separate ways since the great age of the Elizabethans. For instance, under the spell of Charles Lamb's anthology of *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, the poets of the early nineteenth century made an earnest attempt to revive dramatic poetry, believing apparently that the purple passages and big scenes extracted by Lamb were sufficient unto the needs of the theater. It must be admitted that their plays have recognizably dramatic moments. Much of *Manfred* is made up of poetic images realized in dramatic symbols, effectively in the scenes between Manfred and the Chamois Hunter, less effectively in the manifestations of the various spirits, who stubbornly remain abstract despite Byron's attempts to make them concrete.

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The same tendency to deal in abstractions is to be observed in *The Cenci.* Although Shelley's play is so full of echoes as almost to demand the subtitle of *Specimens, Second Edition,* he fails to achieve a consistent realization of the iterated images. There is, however, a parallel between the action and the imagery. Count Cenci works such evil on his pure daughter, Beatrice, that she succumbs to equally evil means in eliminating him. In the early portion of the play Cenci is surrounded with images of darkness, Beatrice with images of light. After the incestuous act, she arranges for her father to be killed in a ravine which she describes in a little set-piece, ending:

> *At noonday here*
> *'Tis twilight, and at sunset blackest night.*

Shelley apologizes in his preface for this passage of "mere poetry," yet it appears singularly appropriate both to the "passion" and the action.

Shelley's failure has often been recognized. He has introduced unnecessary characters simply because they were in his source; there are long soliloquies which prove to be dead ends; far too many of the scenes are debates or conversation pieces, creating a monotonous pattern of action. More serious, I think, is the failure of the imagery to interpenetrate the action as the poet desired. Act III, Scene 1, begins with a Shakespearean echo that on the surface is closely related to the light-dark imagery. Giacomo is musing in the darkness over his father's impending murder. Orsino reminds him that the lamp is out, and he replies, with Othello:

> *And yet once quenched I cannot thus relume*
> *My father's life.*

In *Othello* the image and the accompanying action have the greatest pertinence to the plot and to Othello's frame of mind. In *The Cenci* they may be related to Giacomo's frame of mind, but they reverse the pattern of the iterated image, and since Giacomo is connected with the murder only by a letter written

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by someone else, have almost nothing to do with the dramatic development of the plot. The whole scene is one of the many instances of "mere poetry" which prevent the achievement of a balanced and tempered poetic drama.

Byron, of course, denied that he wrote with the theater in mind, and Shelley, according to his wife, was kept from playgoing by his "fastidious taste." Contemporary poets have been at least more willing to meet the theater on its own grounds. Mr. Eliot deliberately switched from the comfortable recesses of Canterbury and the essentially lyric techniques of the religious pageant to the restricting form of the well made society drama in a realistic setting. *The Family Reunion,* if it be a failure, is a noble failure. Its poetry is essentially dramatic poetry, and the author has attempted to realize, in the figures of the Furies, the iterative image of the play. In a sense, certainly, the realization is successful—what Harry sees in the parlor at Wishwood is the self-perpetuating evil of the sins of the fathers, for which the Eumenides well and truly stand. In another sense, of course, the image is not realized in terms of the theater in which it is to be presented. The Eumenides do not belong to the English drawing room as the tempest belongs to the world of Lear, the crown to Richard, or the nightgown to Macbeth. They are not, however, wholly exterior to the action like Giacomo's lamp in *The Cenci.*

Experiments in expressionism which followed the first World War have been fruitful for poetic drama. Released from the confinement of realism, the theater and the playwright developed techniques for the direct presentation of ideas and levels of meaning which the realist could only hint at. Since every setting, every character, every object in this form must be given symbolic meaning, and these symbols must somehow achieve an overall significance, the playwright perforce works with the needs of the theater constantly in mind. The poet who chooses to employ it is thus secured from the temptation to write abstractly or to employ non-functional images. *The Dog Beneath the Skin* is good evidence of the usefulness of expressionist techniques for the poetic dramatist. But even here, with the devices of the

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theater at his fingertips, Mr. Auden is unable to sacrifice the poet's luxury of an anonymous, non-dramatic chorus to set his scenes and underline his ideas.

Expressionism, by itself, is not enough. The possibilities for peculiarity and obscurity are too great and the temptations to whimsy sometimes overpowering. But poetry is not enough, either, perhaps for the same reasons. The revival of poetic drama awaits a poet whose pride and fastidious taste will not keep him from recognizing in all humility that he is only one-half of a poetic dramatist.

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# *Two Poems*

*JOSEPH BENNETT*

## HEADSONG

O Lord, the whistling sword is beauty
Both to ear and eye; and trembling,
Held by hair, the wordwise head
Cants and chants, cantata to
The whirling blade, the elegance
That swings. So trembling goes the head,
So swayed, so resonant it falls.

O Lord, the spirit was bestowed so carelessly,
It worked through many forms and many mouths
And burnt them all. Earth is cinders
It deposed. Earth is solid lava,
Pocked with bubbles where the air escaped,
But the spirit works the earth and clings.

This graveyard of persistent bones that will
Not wear away, this graveyard still can bloom
In earthly glory, but the soft
Insistent growth of death gathers all the forms
And fruits and dries them in its treasury.
The growth of death is the persistence of skeletons
And the drainage of the earth, to wash it pure.

O Lord, the growth of death is the cancerous breast,
Is the shriveled petal, is the bleeding bird.

For death is a garment exceeding pain,
And fitted when the flesh is newly cut.
The head sings of severance; the sword whirls.
What falls becomes the deep and rooted
Skeleton which will not fail, but glowing

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When the earth has turned to ash
Preserves intact its careful structure.

The phosphorescent spirit hovers:
Exhumation of the well-washed bones
Does not relieve its luminous task.
It is the life of ash and cinders.
It craves no atmosphere, and when
Earth's ponderous axis tips across
The poles and balance stops the sphere,
It glimmers in the absolute
Imaginable cold assigned by space
To heavy planets come to rest:
One side in death; the other burning.

## Pointillism

The Duke di Broccoli and the Countess of Points,
Entertained at the home of Demijohn J. Pavilion.
At Antibes, a twelvemonth of deluxe.

Duchess was not till Irma came;
Points fell, and deluxe was the issue;
The Broccoli bed a field in dispute.

These nobles dined on filigree of potassium;
Permanganate their purple drink.
This vintage bubbled in the cup.
Mr. Pavilion was astonished.

The Countess wore a long black gown,
A candle in her lampblack hair.
The Duchess whirled in motorcars,
Came and went in pale peach dresses.
Pavilion's cobblestones beheld the Duke.

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He Broccoli now held a pipe
And gazed upon the sunset of
The western sea. His vegetables
Were ruminant; his women shrieked.
Peach Irma ran upon the cliff.
Her sails were pale, and potash Points
Pursued with cruel diamonds.
Her jealousy in jagged points
Went black and darting, fixing in
The sails. A baleful card! (The Queen
Of Spades) But Broccoli waits beneath
The cliff with skiff; deluxe will save.

## *The Tennis Court*

*HAROLD KAPLAN*

The tennis balls bounce delicately
Upon the proportioned courts and see
The arm-strong players keep their pace,
The champions of a limited space,
And the game in eternal repartee
Sings and strokes as my life might be.

And up and down the ball is sent
To the corners of a firmament,
The universe is blithe and clear
In a safe and simple miniature,
And in this place they thrive and sing
As the ball survives its punishing.

The body swings in simple glee
Through the circles of its destiny,
And in that geometric dance
The tennis court is circumstance,
To be half-earnest is their sport
In the kingdom of the tennis court.

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And in this grace with absent fear
We enjoy our loves when half-sincere,
These emotions have a civil blend,
There is only courtesy at the end,
Though one suffers for a moment,
Or is happy without comment.

There is no falling in this play
And no posture of dismay,
The gentlemen of the sporting pride
May lose their luck, and some have died,
But how casually they walk away
And wipe their brows and had enough, they say.

## *The Eclipse*

*OSCAR WILLIAMS*

This real expanse collapsed beneath our feet
Upholds us. In the hollow of a hand,
God's rocking hand, along the stars we sweep.
We glimpse the melting skies, round-shouldered stones,
Each other, and the décor of our lives.
The world curls down its edges as we move
Not to debate the view, man's mortal view.
Yet the horizon our lush vision scythes
And curbs the barbarous appetite of reach.
All riches rationed at the source of each,
Which one, of us who dare the edge of good,
Will steal a look between God's fingers glued?

God's fearful hand is out, blocking His face.
We ride a deck that all but covers us
Nor see the deep, love's living deep, we race.

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The journey kindles in a reign of dusk.
We hang on to the rock of an eclipse
Of larger heavens where the great rock stops,
A shade before God's eye. It is our birth.
Our hearts upleaping in corona flame,
The blood dimmed to its color by the one
Vast shadow bolting in its final frame,
All life that darkened moment is, the earth
Looms, rocking, black, against our sun, our sun.

## *Present Cities*

*ELEANOR HESTHAL*

The nasturtiums bitter the noon. Valencia odors
Ebb from the street to the orange middle day.
All the cities are ribbed with volcanoes
Asleep under the pipes, reluctantly lidded,
Waiting to level and to blow.

Science has drawn graphs
And located these exactly.

The lava churns. Occasionally
A main bursts and the earth escapes.

The red sun blares geranium. Pedestrians
Still cross the city under the noon.
Nevertheless
All their heels are altering the pavement:
The concrete, the asphalt, grow thinner.

Leaves fall into the garden fountain
And ripples circle out. The noticing sparrow feels
Deep, continual Etna
Rumbling under boulevarded time,
Shaking the roots of the telegraph tree.

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## CHRONICLES

# *Notes on the Theater*

*FREDERICK MORGAN*

"THE DRAMA AT LARGE IN AMERICA, just now, is certainly neither artistic nor fine; but this is a reason for caring with some tenderness for what it may be in particular cases. . . . If tawdry plays, and acting to match, were things that began and ended with themselves, we could certainly very well afford to leave them alone; for one of the least comfortable signs of the times, to our sense, is the extension, the resonance, as it were, given by voluminous criticism to poor performances. But a thousand theatres full of people contemplating every night in the year spectacles artistically, at least, more or less pernicious, suggest a number of accessory ideas." Thus Henry James, writing on the American theater in 1874. It would seem that in the passage of seventy-five years very little has occurred, in our practice of this particular art, to lessen the application of his words. With equal relevance, in his dialogue "After the Play" (1889), he makes the following observations:

> An immense elaboration of the picture and an immense sacrifice of everything else: it would take very little more to persuade me that that will be the only formula for our children. . . . I have no doubt that the scenic part of the art, remarkable as some of its achievements already appear to us, is only in its infancy, and that we are destined to see wonders done that we now but faintly conceive. The probable extension of the mechanical arts is infinite. "Built in," forsooth! We shall see castles and cities and mountains and rivers built in. Everything points that way; especially the constitution of the contemporary multitude. It is huge and good-natured and common. It likes big, unmistakable, knock-down effects; it likes to get its money back in palpable, computable change. It's in a tremendous hurry, squeezed together, with a sort of generalized gape, and the last thing it expects of you is that you will spin things fine. You can't portray a character, alas, or even, vividly, any sort of human figure, unless, in some degree, you do that. Therefore the theatre, inevitably accommodating itself, will at last be a landscape without figures. I mean, of course, without figures that count. There will be little illustrations of costume stuck about—dressed mannikins; but they'll have nothing to say: they won't even go through the forms of speech.

Mr. Allan Wade, editor of the recent and valuable collection* of James's

**The Scenic Art,* by Henry James. Edited by Allan Wade. Rutgers University Press. $4.50.

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dramatic criticism to which I am indebted for these quotations, rightly finds this last passage prophetic. Our newspaper 'critics' habitually praise a play for the 'realism' of its setting (a police-station, perhaps, or a commercial laundry); while our playwrights show a corresponding disregard for the language in which they are working, a disregard that prevents them, in general, from attaining any but the crudest and bluntest effects. It requires only a modicum of play-going to convince one that there has been no gain in maturity or subtlety in the American drama since the days of Boucicault; the recent season on Broadway, in fact, has been so lacking in interest, even as 'entertainment' pure and simple, that it would be no exaggeration to say that one could gain more insight into the theater from reading Mr. Wade's collection of James than from first-night attendance at all the new plays of the past year. For this book establishes James as a dramatic critic of the first order, highly specialized and severely limited perhaps, but compensating for the narrowness of his scope by the justice of his discriminations.

James's sense of the drama was formed and developed in terms of his close acquaintance with a living theater, that of late nineteenth-century France. Although in its decadence, as James himself realized, this theater, with its magnificent repertory of classical drama bolstered by such adept contemporaries as Dumas *fils*, Augier and Sardou, and with its traditional mastery of nuance in acting and production, was still intelligent and vital enough to merit being considered, in contrast to the American and the British stage, great art; and to give James a permanent basis for his criticisms of the Anglo-Saxon theater. His admiration for the well-made play, and for certain French practitioners of the craft, may appear to us somewhat excessive; this, together with the fact that his drama criticisms were, in general, "occasional pieces," accounts for his narrowness. He never attempted anything like a systematic exploration of dramatic forms (one would not expect this of James); and although, for example, he was discerning enough to appreciate Ibsen's greatness, he never quite came to grips with it in his short pieces on the Norwegian. But the important thing, and the thing that our playwrights and publicists today seem to lack, James had: the sense of the theater as a living art, capable of great immediacy and of great refinement, whose chief, but by no means sole component is the spoken language. He had nothing in common with such armchair appreciators as Charles Lamb. He was eminently conscious of the histrionic, of the drama as *acted*, and beyond this, of the theater's vital function in society. His criticism of actors and acting, and of the audience itself, is as perceptive as his appreciation of the work, and indeed cannot ultimately be distinguished from it. In short, this is a valuable collection: as dramatic criticism, as 'recreation of the times' and as a light thrown on James's own extraordinary sensibility. There is necessarily a certain amount of repetition; but in such pieces as the dialogue "After the Play," in which he gives clearest outline to his own position, and in the great essay on Dumas *fils*, where he

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shows profound understanding of an artist very like, though lesser than, himself, James has left us criticism of permanent importance.

The tawdriness and stupidity of which James complained, now full-grown into the institution known as "Broadway," still dominate the American theater. In addition to James's "huge and good-natured multitude" with its "generalized gape" (the potential national audience, now the market for Hollywood films), one must reckon with the Broadway audience itself, small, but noisy and self-assured. For where the multitude is undiscriminating, Broadway discriminates —in favor of the tawdry and stupid, which it chooses, year after year, to consider "smart" and "up-to-date." And needless to say, this institutionalized tawdriness is given far more "extension and resonance" than in James's time.

One of the most distressing features of this situation is that when a writer appears who is endowed with the dramatic sense, he finds at hand no living theater to enrich and guide his talent. Thus, he tends either to turn "Broadway" or to run into a blind alley of eccentricity and self-repetition. Writers so endowed have been scarce in this country, far scarcer than gifted poets or novelists. I take Eugene O'Neill to have been one, Clifford Odets another; there may have been a few more in the past thirty years, but very few. None of our playwrights can be considered writers of the first, or probably even of the second rank; there have been no developments in the drama in this country comparable to those in the other literary forms. O'Neill, unsatisfactory as he is, is still the best our theater has to offer; and bad as he is in many respects, he is still too good for Broadway, and has never been quite at home there with the Robert E. Sherwoods and Maxwell Andersons. What O'Neill might have accomplished under the discipline that a living American theater would have provided is, of course, pure speculation; he might, at least, have learned something more of the use of words and developed a sense of dramatic effects beyond those that are most crude and obvious.

Tennessee Williams, it appears, is another writer gifted with what I have called the dramatic sense; that is to say, he thinks naturally in terms of represented action. If this be taken as the basic minimum of a playwright's equipment, let me hasten to add that Williams shows no signs of exceeding the minimum.* His range is as narrow as it could well be; to date, he has simply written four versions of the same play (one of them published, but never produced). He evidently writes from some compulsive inner stress, with very little intellectual grasp of just what it is that he is doing; certainly there is little play of the intelligence in any of his work. His use of language, apart from an ability to reproduce ironically some of the triteness of certain areas of speech, is inadequate; and the more inadequate the more he pushes it. In

*But even the minimum is not apparent in the great majority of plays produced on Broadway.

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this connection, his poems and stories, which have been appearing in miscellaneous quarters, may be called in as evidence. Writing elsewhere on his *A Streetcar Named Desire,* I suggested that if Williams was to accomplish anything of importance he would have to break clear of his obsessive theme (the romantic versus society: the conflict conceived in sexual terms), or turn it to new uses, while working to develop and refine his basic minimum of talent: this would involve, among other things, remedying to some extent the deficiencies already noted. It is too soon to tell whether he will do so, for the more recently produced *Summer and Smoke* was apparently written before *A Streetcar Named Desire. Summer and Smoke,* which closed after only a moderate run, establishes the Williams theme by means of a polarity between the two central characters, a repressed minister's daughter and a lecherous young doctor. The action follows the hour-glass pattern: when at last the heroine, at the end of the play, is ready to take on the doctor, he has himself taken the position of conventional respectability. The pivotal action of the play, the accidental killing of the hero's father by a disreputable old Mexican (whose equally disreputable daughter has become the hero's mistress), is badly conceived, and fails. The play is surprisingly slipshod, in fact, on even the most mechanical level, and it was not helped any by an awkward stageset; its only interest lies in the atmosphere of brooding sensuality and despairing nostalgia which is suggested rather than fully dramatized. I preferred it to the more popular *A Streetcar Named Desire* in that it placed less reliance upon opportunistic sensationalism.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has received, this year, most of the prizes, plaudits and acclamations that inevitably attend the doings on Broadway. It is, not surprisingly, a miserable affair; and it would be unfair to single it out here from among the many Broadway productions which are completely devoid of merit, were it not for just this excessive publicity which it has received. The action outlines the mental and moral collapse, leading to suicide, of an aging traveling salesman, who comes to realize that he had based his life on false ideals. Miller had the makings of some sort of play; but he was unfortunately unable to bring a single spark of dramatic intelligence to bear on his material. The terms in which he conceived of his theme are so trite and clumsy as to invalidate the entire play and render offensive its continual demand for the sympathy and indulgence of the audience. It proceeds, with unrelieved vulgarity, from cliché to stereotype. The language is entirely undistinguished (the personages are continually grunting, groaning and vehemently repeating the tritest colloquialisms); the tone of the play can best be described as a sustained snivel. With Tennessee Williams, one can at least maintain that he was "cut out to be" a playwright rather than a poet. But one would be justified in suspecting that the author of *Death of a Salesman* would have attained the same level of untalented and conscientious dullness if he had

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decided to write an epic poem or a novel instead of a play. On the basis of certain of his newspaper articles I presume that Miller considers his new play to be the Tragedy of a Common Man. It is not a tragedy; nor is it, rightly speaking, about any man, common or uncommon. It is, however, pure Broadway, Broadway in a self-pitying mood; and this no doubt accounts for its success, and for the esteem in which it is held by the newspaper reviewers.

Of the remaining productions of a peculiarly uninteresting season, certain adaptations from the French and one revival are perhaps worth some consideration. The revival, by Richard Whorf of *Richard III*, is notable as testimony of the extent to which tawdriness and stupidity can be brought to bear on Shakespeare. Instead of attempting an honest presentation of what is a somewhat uneven and disjointed, but extremely powerful play, Mr. Whorf seemed chiefly concerned to win over his audience as fellow-conspirators in the rather amusing game of making Shakespeare up-to-date and palatable. "Watch me put this nonsense across" (with a broad wink) was more or less his attitude. His way of putting it across was to speak in the same harsh rasp throughout, to overplay Richard's self-consciously villainous lines to the point of burlesque, and to have himself spotlighted in red during his soliloquies. By this interpretation, he managed to make Richard a *cheap* villain and to vulgarize each scene in turn. The supporting players were generally inadequate, and a culminating touch of the ridiculous was furnished by the use of Shostakovitch's *Fifth Symphony* as background music.

James would doubtless be amused to observe that importations from France were largely responsible for what little vitality was displayed on Broadway this season. *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, an adaptation by Maurice Valency of the Giraudoux play, is still being shown at the time of this writing. This production has the most refreshing and almost—this year—unique merit of being unpretentious without triviality. The play is a dramatized fable, an account of the triumph of the artistic sensibility over the pragmatism of contemporary society. The madwoman and her friends are those who appreciate persons and events as ends in themselves; their adversaries are the "presidents" and "prospectors," the pimps who seek to *use* everything and everybody and reduce all experience to terms of profit and loss. The triumph of right is effected by the simple expedient of having all the villains descend into a bottomless pit, from the madwoman's cellar, in a futile search for oil. On the modest level at which the play operates the theme is fully expressed, with considerable wit and charm, particularly in the first act with its delightful sidewalk-café setting (by Bérard). If in the second act matters seem spun too fine at times, and connections lost, the fault may lie with the adaptation. The production is, on the whole, an intelligent one; Martita Hunt performs beautifully in the central role, and the supporting players are all good, some of them excellent. Such a

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play—small, but intelligent and complete—is peculiarly the product of a country with a flourishing dramatic tradition; we have not yet produced a playwright of sufficient maturity to handle such a theme without descending into the triviality and bathos of a Saroyan.

The other adaptations on my list are all from the work of a Frenchman who has received a disproportionate amount of attention here, Jean-Paul Sartre. *Red Gloves* (from *Les mains sales*) was produced on Broadway by Jed Harris; New Stages, an off-Broadway group, after scoring a success a year ago with *The Respectful Prostitute* (which was consequently moved from Bleecker Street to Broadway), this winter presented *The Victors,* an adaptation by Thornton Wilder of *Morts sans sépulture.* Sartre, for all his modernity and *engagement,* owes as playwright a great deal (almost everything, in fact) to the tradition of the French well-made play. On the mechanical level he is far more accomplished as a dramatist than as a writer of fiction. He is "at home" when thinking in dramatic terms; his language is, on the whole, sharp, economical and adequate to his purpose; he is, up to a point, extremely intelligent. Unfortunately, his intelligence is essentially of the pamphleteering order, and its effect, in his plays, is to reduce the human situation, the "life" that he is attempting to render dramatically, into a set of abstract propositions which seek to impose a peculiarly incoherent and sterile "philosophy." This is as true of the recent pseudo-realistic plays here considered as it is of the early "mythological" ones. His procedure necessarily entails falsification and distortion of his basic dramatic materials; in general, he comes closest to writing a good play when he is at his most abstract, as in *Huis clos* (*No Exit*). From this standpoint, *The Victors* is the poorest of the recent plays: the use of torture, rape and murder (the play concerns certain members of the French resistance who have been taken prisoner by the Vichy police) simply to prove the existentialist point is so serious a falsification as to make the entire enterprise seem adolescent and ridiculous. *The Respectful Prostitute,* which uses Sartre's conception of race relations in the American South as garb for the existentialist skeleton, is as ridiculous as *The Victors,* but less offensive—except, perhaps, to Southerners. The action is well paced, and there are moments of raw and sardonic humor (admirably exploited by Meg Mundy in her portrayal of the title role); but the characters and situations are conceived at the cartoon level only. Clearly Sartre's understanding of his *situation,* if not of his thesis, is dangerously over-simplified. His latest play, *Les mains sales,* is much more successful, for here he has worked out a more appropriate context in which to embed his ideas. Set in a Central European country as the late war is drawing to a close, the action centers about the predicament of an idealistic young intellectual who joins the Communist party and undertakes secretly the task of assassinating the Communist leader, who is held to be deviating from the party line in the interests of expediency. From the moment of meeting the

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leader, whom he learns to like and admire, the young man is caught in a continuing crisis. There is no need to outline the ingenious plot: the point is that the hero, before and after the decisive act, keeps himself in a state of continual anxiety, according to the by now familiar existentialist pattern, as to whether his motives are really pure and his choice really free. At the end of the play, he commits himself to what he has done, this being the only way he can preserve his identity. The chief interest of the play, however, lies not in the rather tedious exposition of the stereotyped existentialist crisis, but in its manipulation of contrasted political attitudes; and much of this interest was retained in the Broadway production, although the adaptation, by Daniel Taradash, seriously distorted Sartre's intentions in other respects by large-scale cutting.

It is fair to say, I think, on the basis of these three plays, as well as of *Huis clos* and *Les mouches,* that although it is an excellent thing that Sartre is being produced in this country—our theater can learn from his craftsmanship and intellectual limberness—it is regrettable that he has received such exclusive attention, as though he were somehow an isolated phenomenon, and not the rather minor representative of a great tradition.

More stimulating and encouraging than anything Broadway had to offer were two productions* that took place, so to speak, "on the fringes." One was Lorca's *Blood Wedding,* presented by New Stages at their Bleecker Street theater; the other, a lively version of Auden's and Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath the Skin,* put on at the Carnegie Recital Hall by a young group known as The Interplayers. Both of these plays are of unusual interest in that they demonstrate that the convention of the well-made play is by no means the only viable one today. *Blood Wedding* has always seemed to me to be a minor masterpiece of poetic drama. If the New Stages production was not in every respect successful in reproducing the peculiar savagery and passion of the original, the task of presenting this work on the American stage was, after all, formidable, and it was encouraging to see the attempt made. The translation, although necessarily falling far short of the original, held up surprisingly well, even in the lyric choral passages.

The Interplayers performed *The Dog Beneath the Skin,* complete with music and dance routines, with zest and enthusiasm. If certain episodes of this entertainment have worn somewhat thin, and the whole is not to be taken too seriously, it still has its excellent moments of nervous comedy and cruel wit. It is perhaps chiefly important as indicating the possible range of effects that can be attained in the convention of the modern musical comedy, or "revue."

*I missed the Experimental Theatre's production of *Uniform of Flesh,* an adaptation of *Billy Budd* by Louis O. Coxe and R. H. Chapman. It was well received, and is due, I understand, to make an early appearance on Broadway.

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Needless to say, it is still far more intelligent and entertaining than any Broadway musical.

The American theater, as Eric Bentley and others have proclaimed, is dead; what is more, it seems never to have been alive to begin with. The occasional good things done on Broadway—usually revivals of the more recent "classics"—are few and far between, and by no means enough to counterbalance the prevailing tawdriness and stupidity of "show business." If we are to have a living theater in this country, we must, for the moment, be content with modest beginnings. I should list the basic requirements somewhat as follows. The starting-point would be a small but cohesive group, under intelligent direction, reasonably disillusioned with the *status quo* and reasonably united in its aims. The group would have to have a large potential audience readily available; it should therefore establish itself in a city or large town, but *not* in New York, where there is too much competition and risk of contamination. It should play repertory of as wide a range as it can handle; it should take care *not* to play down to its audience, and not to put on anything that resembles warmed-over Broadway. Because such a group would require time in which to accomplish its objectives, it should be assured of being able to maintain its identity and its unity of purpose for a period of several years; it would require financial backing of the sort that would not prejudice its aims. This backing would have to come, it seems clear, from private sources; if our government decides to do anything about the theater, there is unfortunately little room to doubt that it will do it through the instrumentality of prominent Broadway personages—and we shall simply be getting more Shakespeare à la Margaret Webster and more José Ferrer Cyranos.

The difficulties confronting our hypothetical group would be serious, but by no means insurmountable. An excellent start could be made for far less money than has gone into each pretentious piece of clap-trap presently adorning the Broadway stage. Given a reasonable guarantee of security over a reasonable period of time, such a group would have the opportunity to develop its own potentialities and those of its audience, and to create the beginnings of a climate in which a living American theater might eventually flourish.

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# *Grimes and Lucretia*

*JOSEPH KERMAN*

MR. PAUL HENRY LANG TELLS ABOUT a musical lexicon of the turn of the century that contains this brief definition: "Opera: old-fashioned term for Music-drama (*q.v.*), popular before the time of Richard Wagner." The term has retained some of its popularity; nevertheless the New York production of Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* was still advertised as music-drama—not without humor after the music and drama critics of the *Herald-Tribune* had quite properly pronounced it in parallel columns (1) no music, and (2) no drama, respectively. One has to look earlier than Richard Wagner for more meaningful nomenclature for opera. In the seventeenth century an opera was ordinarily called *dramma per musica,* after the librettists' inscription, "drama for music"; but the phrase can also be taken to mean "drama by means of music," in analogy to poetic drama, drama by means of poetry. It is the beauty and vigor of the verse or music, as the case may be, that gives the drama its expression and its existence. Modern methods of opera analysis, from which this review shall not deviate, insist on the importance of the libretto in determining the form of an opera, its emphasis and its conventions. The book gives the composer inspiration and opportunity, sets his mood, channels his style to its thought, and holds the key to potentialities that might otherwise never be tried. But when analysis is done it must be remembered that the central aesthetic fact is what the composer does with and to his libretto. A bad libretto can veto the whole undertaking, but a good one does not guarantee good opera. The composer, on whom it all finally rests, has to rely almost pathetically on the prerequisite efforts of the librettist; and this unhappy and extremely difficult situation has caused all the solecisms and noble failures, the qualified successes and *chefs-d'oeuvre manqués* that make up this always fascinating and imperfect genre, *dramma per musica.*

So much as preface to a discussion of the strange progress of Benjamin Britten in his first two operas, *Peter Grimes* and *The Rape of Lucretia.* The first seems to me a most remarkable first opera by any standards at all. It is pure melodrama. The story, which owes little to George Crabbe's *The Borough,* concerns a sadistic fisherman, Peter Grimes, whose incoherent efforts at self-improvement are thwarted by the hostile gossip of a community that resents his dissidence and suspects him of murdering his apprentices. Apart from

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obtrusive local color, the drama revolves principally around these melodramatic elements, on stage: Grimes's trial for the death of his first apprentice; the second boy's arrival during a furious midnight storm; his accidental death; the Borough aroused by a suspicious old widow gossip and a spiteful "Methody" fisherman; Grimes's pub-brawl with this fisherman; two mobs out after Grimes, on two separate occasions; the efforts of his only friends (Balstrode, a skipper, and Ellen, the schoolmistress) to temper his fierce recalcitrance; Grimes's resistance to these efforts, expressed in a certain amount of roughing up of Ellen and the boy; his decent aspirations in spite of this, and his eventual insanity and suicide. The libretto by Montague Slater is only too efficient for what it purports to be, and hands Britten a steady series of first-rate situations, almost all of which he attends to with music that is sincere, powerful, thoroughly imaginative and dramatically apposite. There are no more than the usual number of musical or dramatic or musico-dramatic faults, which do little damage to the overall effect, and which I feel positive will neither prevent *Grimes* from establishing itself firmly as the only contemporary opera in the Metropolitan repertoire, nor from holding the stage with any other melodrama presented there. In musical substance it is a great deal more distinguished than most of them.

Indeed the libretto is not only effective, it is positively slick, reading sometimes like a text-book of the tried devices of *verismo* melodrama—the milling chorus, the tavern scene, the storm, the fight on-stage, the set-song, the stage-band and all the rest. Local color is spread on much too thick, with emphasis on the seamy side of village life; and though Britten often makes good and legitimate use of it, the general effect would seem more appropriate to Catfish Row. One could go through the opera in detail pointing out melodramatic incidents that are extraneous to the main action, and odds and ends thrown in simply to make this or that local eccentric more piquant. But these decrease significantly as the opera proceeds; although the first act is often contrived, and the second vacillating, the third is quite magnificent. Thus the chorus, for which Britten writes so superbly, hardly establishes itself as the protagonist it is until the end. Their storm scene in the first act is patently injected—we expect a *Dankgesang*—and their behavior in the second is equivocal; I am aware that something has to be held in check for the next posse in the third act, but surely the frustrated chorus should do something on reaching Grimes's deserted hut before extinguishing itself in the pale humor of Lawyer Swallow's bassoon. Humorous interludes are used much more happily at the beginning of Act III, where they alternate with the serious business simply and to some relevant effect. One could not do without the preposterous Mrs. Sedley here, or even the parson with his Viennese roses, because they really build to the lightning a-cappella climax, and frame Ellen's

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lovely aria as delicately and as appropriately as any operatic aria I know. But the most beautiful place in the score is the still quartet sung by Ellen, Auntie and the two Nieces (the libretto shyly calls them "the main attractions at *The Boar*") to close the first scene in Act II. The posse, drum and all, has marched off to an impressive *unisono,* leaving the women behind, static and irrelevant; a most irregular dramatic effect if Britten did not transform it and redeem it with a sublime little set piece. Under these circumstances I would not complain that it has nothing much to do with the action.

The most brilliant achievement of the opera is the very last scene, in which music is reduced successively to absolute zero on a grand scale. Indeed the orchestral interludes, of a descriptive or psychological nature, that Britten writes between his scenes were evidently planned with this effect in mind. As the curtain rises the orchestra stops altogether; Grimes is on stage alone, raving. What he has to say consists largely of quotations from earlier scenes of the work, and if you have been listening to the opera each one of these has quite a terrible effect. The only accompaniment to this sporadic recitative is an occasional moan of a foghorn and far-off insistent cries of the chorus, calling Peter Grimes by his name in the strange sensuous chords that present themselves in phantasmagoria to his crazed imagination. Perhaps it is not the lynching-party on the sands that he hears at all, but the whole Borough, his whole vicious universe; perhaps even the hoarse summons of the constable calling him to trial, the first words of the opera: *"Peter Grimes! Peter Grimes!"* Balstrode and Ellen come upon him through the fog, but he hardly recognizes them, though he obeys without a word as Balstrode helps him back to his boat and orders him to scuttle it out past the lights. And these final words of Balstrode's are not sung at all, but spoken; orchestra, foghorn, chorus and recitative have all ceased as the boat is launched in silence. Of course Verdi would not have set it that way; but what Britten means to convey, surely, is not climax but rather the numb consummation of an eventuality that was a foregone conclusion at the end of the preceding act. If we wish to imagine a climax it must have been during those two days between the acts when Grimes was out at sea with the boy's broken corpse, starving and driving himself out of his mind; Balstrode pushes the boat out quite as a matter of course, and neither Grimes nor Ellen have it in them to object. I think this scene might be staged in almost complete darkness. Its expressive decrescendo, ending in non-musical speech, is a powerful evocation of the dead hopelessness, past tragedy, of Grimes's ultimate predicament.

This is of course no more unmusical than the end of *Henry IV* is unpoetic when Falstaff not only surrenders to Shallow but is even unable to muster up a pentameter: *Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound.* In the graveyard

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scene of *Don Giovanni* the *secco* speech of the Don and Leporello is twice pierced by a single line of music sung by the Commendatore—the simplest and most terrifying device imaginable; Britten here applies the same principle in reverse, expanded into a climactic operatic scene. It takes an enormously skillful composer working within a careful convention to write anything but bloodless opera without such simple strokes. There are plenty of them in *Grimes,* of which this last scene is only the baldest and the most effective, and they clearly constitute the opera's greatest strength. I presume that there is nothing dated about melodrama as such today, if it can be used to convey contemporary meaning; it is stock in trade of the modern theater, such as it is, and it is used almost by nature of the medium in the movies, such as they are. It is also well fitted to the nature of the musical medium, and to my mind *Peter Grimes* is proof enough of its vigor as a carrier of twentieth-century musical thought. Its musical realization is correspondingly simple, which I think is as it should be in the opera-house, forthright, angrily unromantic, thoroughly professional, never vulgar, and in every way contemporary in connotations and effect.

As to the subtlety of the characterization on a more delicate level, we may well defer judgment until we are better acquainted with Britten and he is better acquainted with his medium. Or at least until he chooses himself a libretto more suited to real psychological delineation; for underneath its high-powered façade *Grimes* is obviously a fairly weak piece of dramatic action, and when one considers the main protagonists, Grimes and the Borough, the drama immediately slips away between the fingers. Nothing really happens to Grimes; we are shown nothing beyond the obvious vices that cause his downfall. We are apparently expected to sympathize with him for no other reason than his dissidence; and although this Byronic pose is still familiar, and remains a legitimate subject for contemporary consideration and pity, one has the right to expect some kind of dramatic construction beyond a mere presentation of the situation. There is no interplay of characters to throw Grimes into relief, for there are no other characters; Ellen and especially Balstrode are caricatures, and Grimes's break with Ellen, the one possibility for real drama, is bungled in book and score alike. All this is very true, and not to be taken lightly, but I must say that it is a great deal more evident when the lights are up and one can read the libretto than while the play is actually in progress. In opera the final credibility is in the music, and Britten can almost always make us believe in Grimes though Slater hardly can—Grimes as a man, not a predicament. Throughout the melodramatic scenes, which are impersonal and a little savage, Grimes is stark and true on the stage and in the orchestra. As for the more personal lyric moments, and I think of the scene in Grimes's hut, these are more apt to leave the listener wondering. In

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*Lucretia* the book is much more hopeless, and Britten's failure at the characterization (if he even attempted it) is correspondingly more apparent.

*Grimes* then must be relegated to that extensive class of operas which fail to meet the standard of an ideal synthesis of music and drama and philosophy that Wagner envisioned; he is in good company there, along with everything that Wagner wrote. By these standards the only near-perfect works of Mozart are *Figaro* and *Cosi fan Tutte*—wonderful pieces, but not as wonderful as *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* respectively, the latter a patent dramatic hodge-podge, and the former bragging all the dramatic faults that Dent has listed plus the disastrous finale that he manages to accept. At the risk of making my own sympathies egregiously plain, I would say that in opera the overall coherence, subtlety, and even credibility of the dramatic conception are less urgent than a practical series of individual scenes with which the composer may establish his own dramatic point, his own subtlety and his own credibility, if only for the moment. This is, of course, no kind of ideal for composers and librettists, but it is perhaps a more useful critical criterion for the actual operatic repertoire, old and new, than the familiar antithesis of music and drama, with the Italians always favoring one side, the French the other, and with a certain German arriving at the final synthesis. The genre has conventions and laws and a dignity of its own, and it is a mistake to imagine that a capable composer could not produce drama in the days of Metastasian *opera seria.*

II

*Grimes* was Britten's promising start within the conventions of a safe and established (and still relevant) operatic variety. His second opera tries a completely new dramatic conception and a completely different type of libretto (I gather that his third, *Albert Herring,* a comedy, is again on a new tack). Unfortunately the way that *Lucretia* adopts and intensifies the clear weaknesses of *Grimes* and at the same time abandons its very real merits looks more like a dilettante experiment than a considered step towards a more secure operatic ideal. It takes every opportunity to appear more "modern" than *Grimes,* as though the composer had been convinced that the latter has not quite the requisite contemporaneity about it. *Grimes* is straight melodrama, set in the early nineteenth century, written in *verismo* style; for all its faults it tells a story and tries to tell it dramatically. *Lucretia,* on the other hand, is a moral discussion, based on a classical legend elevated to a myth, and operates by means of narrative and contemplative choruses to such an extent that the tenor and soprano singing these choruses have the largest roles in the opera. There is no plot, properly speaking; the story, pared to a bare minimum, simply serves as a series of logical examples with the help of which Chorus and

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characters conspire to project a turgid metaphysic. Technically the libretto to *Grimes* is a skeletal, business-like poem that wastes no words and takes next to no trouble with the verse once it arrives at good material for musical transfiguration. The *Lucretia* libretto, I think I am correct in saying, purports to stand by itself as a poetic drama of metaphysical import, with all the poetic refinements and techniques that this implies. And, most important of all, while Britten set his first opera as real *dramma per musica,* in his second he was impelled to step aside shyly to let the poetry speak for itself—evidently on the theory that since the poem already had the drama fixed, there was little to do but have it heard as directly as possible. One can see why, too; for while music is admirably suited to dramatic or lyric formulations of human emotion, it has always found philosophical poetry unadaptable to its own purposes. Such literary experiments in opera are not very interesting to the musician, and place dangerous and unnatural responsibility on the talent of the librettist.

Apparently it has always been hard for Britten to resist the seductions of modern poetry, but resist them he must. Poetry is not the only contemporary insight; there is an equally valid musical insight which is his proper concern. If in *Lucretia* he was not seeking "modern ideas" in a modern poetic expression (which is what he got) so much as a new formal approach to drama, his overtures to the verse play were all to the good. But unfortunately there is no recent tradition of poetic drama for him to rely on comparable to that of operatic *verismo.* It is all very well for composers to experiment with experimental poetic drama, but unless they know something about poetry they will likely land up with something that is neither poetry nor drama, like Mr. Ronald Duncan's libretto to *The Rape of Lucretia.* Something arresting might surely have been done along the lines outlined in the last paragraph, but Mr. Duncan's attempt is inexcusably drab. He has no idea of drama whatsoever, and I find his philosophy, here diluted from Obey, neither sensible nor coherent. I would not so presume as to judge a libretto as verse except in exactly this exceptional case, where the composer's exaggerated respect for it forces his audience to do so. Lines like

*Last night Tarquinius ravished me*
*And took his peace from me and tore*
*The fabric of our love.*
*What we had woven*
*Tarquinius has broken.*
*What I have spoken*
*Never can be forgotten.*

are dreadful enough in themselves, doubly bad when they stand at the climax

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of a verse play, triply bad when Lucretia is asked to declaim them *entirely* on a monotone unaccompanied low B. If there were not the example of *Grimes*, Britten's willingness to set this book would seem to convict him of complete inadequacy for dramatic composition.

The final credibility is in the music. The score is well enough composed, more finely than *Grimes*, in fact, but its musical paucity is astonishing by comparison. What Britten does most successfully are the narrative recitatives, things like the description of Tarquinius' drunken gallop to Rome, declaimed by the Male Chorus over a sort of athletic orchestral background; exactly those parts, as a friend remarked to me after the performance, that he should not have allowed himself to do best. The music for the scenes or tableaux which the Choruses expose to the audience should presumably rise somewhere above the level of these recitatives, but it fails to do so almost consistently. The spinning scene of Lucretia and her ladies does not bring them to life, though the vocalises as the linen is folded, against which the Female Chorus comments, are lovely. I was untouched by the ceremonial "Goodnight" or by anything in the rape scene after the preliminary lullaby; the chorale with which the Choruses gloss it is altogether inadequate and besides reminds me urgently of a Schubert song called *In der Ferne*, which I much dislike. The flower music ("Oh! what a lovely day") does not work, nor the final ensemble, nor the dirge, which seems dangerously close to sentimentality. This disposes of almost all the musical sections of the work, as opposed to plain recitative, except for the most beautiful pages, the very last, where the final questions of the puppet protagonists are taken up by the Choruses and made into a moral epilogue. The newly-illuminated recapitulation is most affecting, although the mood seems less appropriate to any recognizable form of Christianity than to a Sea Interlude from *Peter Grimes*. It is however better composed than any of those.

Benjamin Britten is thirty-six, just at the beginning of his career as an opera composer, a career which incidentally is receiving unprecedented encouragement in the form of commissions in this country, ballyhoo in England, and performances everywhere. He is a very clever composer, well known for experiments and irresponsibilities, like *Lucretia*, which are less ruinous in the long run than they must appear to critics on the spot who have to make out a watertight case. Everyone seems to agree that his place is in opera. His musical expression is unintrospective and externalized, bold with sufficient distinction of mind to prevent it from becoming gaudy; he has something of Berlioz' naive gusto with a musical idea once it has got hold of him. An acknowledged master of the craft of orchestral and vocal writing, he is not afraid to write simply for the stage. He uses leitmotives with a nice sense for the limitations of the device, and both *Grimes* and *Lucretia* attest to his ability to set and

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maintain a mood that is more than a stereotype. Technically his style is fortunate for opera, too: very little counterpoint, and what there is pretty obvious; a big, clear, expansive lyric sweep, of which he is unashamed; a harmonic style that employs a good number of classical sonorities at the crucial places—a matter of some practical necessity, I think, since one has to count on opera-singers sometimes singing off-tune. Above all he has a God-given sense of pace. There is often something peculiar about his declamation, a vexed subject that is worth a whole new article; but my sympathies are always with the man who will take an imaginative musical risk with a phrase that needs more than simply an exact elocutionary transcription. The potentialities are all there, and the opportunity, and also the proof of initial achievement. Britten now has to work out his own operatic solution, and work it out seriously for himself.

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## REVIEWS

# *Mr. Eliot's New Book*

NOTES TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF CULTURE, by *T. S. Eliot.* Harcourt, Brace. $2.50

### 1. *HERBERT READ*

THE AWARD of the Nobel Prize to T. S. Eliot coincided with the publication of a new book by him—not a book of poems or of literary criticism, but of what would usually be called "sociology." It is not the first book of this kind that Mr. Eliot has published—*Thoughts after Lambeth* and *The Idea of a Christian Society* also deal with social issues, and in general, even in his poetry, he is constantly aware of the problems that distress our age. His point of view is that of a Christian and a note of fervent apologetics underlies all his argument. But the pitch is always perfectly controlled—he believes with Lord Acton whom he quotes to this effect, that our studies "want to be pursued with chastity like mathematics."

The title of his new book is precise—"*Notes Towards* the Definition of Culture"; not a systematic treatise in the manner of a German or an American sociologist, not a claim to completeness or finality. Nevertheless, the argument is closely reasoned, and if we would understand it not one of its hundred pages can safely be omitted.

In a book whose whole purpose is to establish distinctions, to advance qualifications, we must not expect dogmatic conclusions. At the end of our reading we are more conscious of what culture is *not* rather than of what it is. It is, we are told, "a way of life of a particular people living in a particular place," "a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving." It is the "pattern of the society as a whole" and it is in some sense an unconscious product and cannot be deliberately created by education or political action.

Culture in this sense must be distinguished from the culture, or cultivated taste of the individual, as well as from the culture of a group or class within a society. It is misleading to identify culture with any of its specific manifestations—it is a question of fine manners and good cooking no less than of great architecture and immortal poetry. But there is one general assertion which, in Mr. Eliot's opinion, can be made about all cultures—"no culture," he says, "has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture."

Mr. Eliot takes great pains to define this "togetherness" of religion and culture. He warns us several times not to make Matthew Arnold's mistake of

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assuming that culture is something more comprehensive than religion. Equally we must avoid the error of regarding religion and culture as two separate things between which there is a *relation;* and the alternative error of identifying religion and culture. All these attempts at definition lack spiritual subtlety, and though he is "aware of the temerity of employing such an exalted term," Mr. Eliot cannot think of any other which would convey so well the intention to avoid *relation* on the one hand and identification on the other as the word *incarnation*: the culture of a society is the incarnation of its religion.

But there are further qualifications to make. There are religions "of partial truth" and people with "a truer light," "higher" religions and "lower" religions, and if we should be compelled by the objective evidence to admit that a religion of partial truth, such as Buddhism, is incarnated in a culture superior to our own, that is only because our society is not really Christian. But surely the Buddhist might retort that if in some respect the culture of India or China is in our view inferior to our own, that is only because it is not "really" Buddhist. If we are to have what might be called a science of comparative culture, then we must also have a science of comparative religion; and all that the scientists will be able to conclude is that while culture is generally (not always) found in association with religion, there is no evidence to show that any one type of religion is "truer" than another. There is one way of life (comprising religion and art and every other kind of cultural manifestation) and there is another way of life, and the only *objective* test of their worth would seem to be the degree of happiness generated by each way of life —Bentham's sensible test of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

I agree with Mr. Eliot on so many essential points that it is only with a feeling of hopeless bafflement that I find myself being skeptical on the issue which he obviously regards as the most important of all. I agree that culture is an indefinable way of life—that it cannot be plotted or analyzed or scientifically communicated in any effective way. "Culture can never be wholly conscious—there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning"—my own philosophy is embodied in that general statement of Mr. Eliot's. But even assuming that culture is the incarnation of religion, I cannot help observing that the flesh can be corrupted. How often in the history of mankind has a corrupted church been responsible for the disruption of a culture—for the destruction of a pattern of culture, for the distortion of a way of life! If you want the evidence, look round you at all the monuments defaced by a righteous spirit of asceticism.

If a sociologist allows himself to speak of "higher" and "lower" religions, of "truer" and less true lights, he is tacitly admitting an evolutionary order in religions. Whether this is or is not a correct interpretation of Mr. Eliot's meaning, the fact that societies have in historical times evolved from primi-

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tive to more elaborate or "civilized" patterns, taken together with the assertion that culture is the incarnation of religion, implies that religion itself has also evolved. But once we admit a principle of evolution in religion we are committed (as sociologists) to the prospect of a further stage in the evolution of religion. But that is not the underlying assumption of Mr. Eliot's thesis. If I do not misunderstand him, he assumes that our European destiny is to work out a pattern of culture ordained nearly two thousand years ago. I am genuinely anxious to understand the Christian sociologists on this point. To me it seems that Christian culture reached its perfection in the Middle Ages—in the Christian state of Saint Louis, for example. It does not seem to me to be very realistic to suggest that we can re-establish the cultural pattern of the thirteenth century; and at the same time any incarnation of the Christian faith would seem to imply a society far more like the feudal societies of the Middle Ages than anything we have experienced in modern history. If that kind of medievalism is not in Mr. Eliot's mind, then he must envisage a very different kind of society—a society different from that of the thirteenth century no less than from our society. But a *different* society, on his own argument, would seem to imply the incarnation of a *different* religion. A different religion is precisely what I contemplate as the substance of any renewal of culture in the future, but from Mr. Eliot's point of view that is a gross heresy.

That Mr. Eliot seeks to restore a past order to correspond with a past stage of religious evolution is shown by his treatment of the question of élites. This fashionable word hides the social phenomenon more realistically known as a dominant or privileged class. Admittedly an élite can be cultured—it can encourage and protect artists and scholars and even to some extent assimilate such agents of culture into its own body. The fact that people are variously endowed at birth with genius or talent means that if a society is to benefit to the full from its humanity, it must allow its best brains, its wisest minds, to rise to positions of influence in the public service. It would seem, from a biological point of view, that the best system would be one that allowed this talent to rise freely to the top, like cream on milk. That is the policy known as "equality of opportunity." Mr. Eliot is opposed to it, with a somewhat surprising violence. He argues that it is "an ideal which can only be fully realised when the institution of the family is no longer respected, and when parental control and responsibility passes to the State. Any system which puts it into effect must see that no advantages of family fortune, no advantages due to the foresight, the self-sacrifice or the ambition of parents are allowed to obtain for any child or young person an education superior to that to which the system finds him to be entitled." I should have thought that the family, in Mr. Eliot's no less than in my own view, was bound together by something more spiritual than self-interest; but let us look for a moment at the consequences of an education

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depending on privilege. In the administrative branches of the British Civil Service, as well as in the Armed Forces, there is no doubt that a "career open to talents" has proved the only safe rule from the point of view of the efficiency of those services and the safety of our society. It cannot be questioned that the two world wars were organized and prosecuted not by a professional élite, or a class élite, but by an élite drawn by a selective process from the nation at large.

War in my opinion is not a cultural activity, but the position is not different in the peacetime cadres of our Civil Service, our county and borough services, and in the vast organization of our economic life. What is left? Mr. Eliot cannot reply: "All that we mean by the word culture," for he has already defined culture as an indivisible way of life. But religion, art, learning—these are left. Are we to assume that different rules apply to them—that in these spheres of life culture by exception must be formed and transmitted by a privileged class?—the privileges being exclusive property, exclusive schools, exclusive universities and exclusive clubs.

Levels of culture are inevitable; specialization of culture is desirable; but I am not convinced that these depend on an aristocratic organization of society. Mr. Eliot is contemptuous of the doctrine of egalitarianism; he thinks it leads to licentiousness and irresponsibility. I do not think he has given due consideration to what might be called the *mystique* of the doctrine. Some Christians argue that this mystique is implied in the Fatherhood of God, in the Brotherhood of Man; I am not in a position to substantiate their argument. I take my evidence from biology and history, and this evidence suggests to me that the highest achievements of man, moral and material, are due to the impulse of mutual aid. There is, of course, an individual one-way expression of this impulse—we then call it sympathy or charity. But the higher form of its expression is mutual, an "I-Thou" dialogue, a sinking of differences, an exercise of humility. To the extent that this relationship prevails in a society we have that social unity, that "peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving" which generates and transmits a culture.

I must confess that I have not given the whole of Mr. Eliot's argument at this point, but that is because it is not quite clear to me. He states that the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family, and in that I agree. He then says that in a more highly civilized society there must be different levels of culture, and there too I agree, subject to my remarks about equality of opportunity. But he then concludes, from these two premises, that only by maintaining class privileges can culture be transmitted from generation to generation. Groups of families must persist each in the same way of life—the landed gentry, presumably, must remain landed gentry, the merchant adventurers must remain merchant adventurers, and the poor must know their place and keep it. Mr. Eliot recognizes the danger of *ossification;* he thinks that

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a modest flow of blood from one social level to another will prevent it. But that is not the lesson of history. Privilege does not necessarily lead to enlightenment, and only rarely to *noblesse oblige*. Rather it breeds a spirit of entrenchment, of pride, of infallibility; finally a tyranny against which the spirit of man again and again has risen in bloody revolt.

## 2. *HUGH KENNER*

THE PROPER REVIEWER for this book would be Jacques Maritain, whose insight, terminology, and authority might do much to expose the fact that Mr. Eliot is a considerable metaphysician, who has been nourished during his long career by an intuition of being, describable only in metaphysical terms. Lacking such qualifications, one may more modestly work toward a similar end by reviewing Mr. Eliot's reviewers. Most of these have simply barked their shins on "social classes" and howled. The conditioned reflexes of a few others, however, are more spectacular: the appropriate stimulus sends them into a tribal war-dance. Pavlov himself would have been delighted by the instantaneous salivation of these taut and well-trained watch-dogs at the sight of the Reverend Eliot's gaitered calf.

The appearance of such a book, that is, simply sets the appropriate portions of the nation's book-reviewing machinery into exactly predictable movements which may be mistaken by the unwary reader for critical judgment. But there is no reason, unless he is well drilled past all saving, why his mental machinery should work in the same way. I intend to glance at two of these reviews which represent two extremely common responses to the man of vision and to the arts: the reader who sees through their strategies will have a better chance of seeing what Mr. Eliot is really offering him.

Professor Irwin Edman, like a good Columbia pragmatist, exhibits to his audience the "confusion and dogmatism" of *T. S. Eliot as "Sociologist."*[1] Dr. Edman, with genial professional determination, goes after "Mr. Eliot's general hypothesis of culture"; (though since it is a poet rather than a sociologist who has committed this book, we may be prepared to find "delicate if not systematic sense"; Dr. Edman duly alludes to "Socrates' comment on the nonsense talked by inspired poets when they begin explaining things"). If the sense he discovers is not even delicate, it is probably because Dr. Edman (whose *Philosopher's Holiday* was largely bad prose poetry) is not a very delicate reader. His notion of poetry can be nicely extracted from this review: he pays tribute to Mr. Eliot's "poetry, its characteristic phrases, its subtle gradations, its early

[1] *New York Times*, March 6, 1949. The condescending quotes around the operative word appear on the page 22 carryover heading; the main head, in the relative daylight of page 3, is more abashed.

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ironies and despairs, its later attitudes and eternities," as though cataloguing the gestures of a ballerina. That modes of consciousness rather than rhetorical strategies are central to the poetic act would not emerge from such an account. There is even better evidence of a defective approach. We find on the first page of Mr. Eliot's Introduction,

> I have observed with growing anxiety the career of this word *culture* during the past six or seven years.

Mr. Eliot then proceeds to document his observations. Having passed through the Edman typewriter,[2] however, it all comes out like this:

> . . . his terms are not always clear. He tells us culture has been "misused," "that he is anxious about his career."

A still more interesting misquotation occurs presently. "Here," says Mr. Eliot, still in his Introduction, "are what I believe to be essential conditions for the growth and survival of culture." Mr. Edman's wishful daemon intervenes, and the phrase comes out in the *Times* as "the essential conditions."

Mr. Eliot, it is obvious, is here being exhibited as a most inexpert *system-builder*. The dialectician's system, of course, has to be complete to the last screw or it won't run: "*the* essential conditions," in short, not just some of the important ones. If you are looking for detective-story consistency of that order (and that is the only criterion of intellectual activity most people have been able to understand since Descartes reasoned "his" world piece by piece into existence) you will have no trouble making hay of Mr. Eliot's prose. You will be "shocked" by his failings in "elementary logic" (unless you remind yourself every so often that the poor fellow is after all a *poet*) and "any freshman" will be smart enough to confirm you. And with the help of some inaccurate quotation (I might have given more examples) and much obtuseness of paraphrase you can easily make the book resemble "the meditations, often irascible and incoherent, of an educated English clergyman . . . rather primly calling the world to order."

And if someone protests that you quoted, ". . . that anyone should have advantages of birth . . ." whereas Mr. Eliot actually wrote, ". . . that anyone should have 'advantages of birth'. . ." you will concede the slip and say that it makes no difference. Of course the quotation marks, with their implication that the phrase is not of Mr. Eliot's choosing, make no difference at all to the logician, but their absence is one of the many small adjustments that mangle Eliot's supple, sophisticated prose into jargon and make more persuasive the implication that he was trying to write a sociologist's book. Perhaps no conscious

[2]And, it is only fair to add, the *Times* linotype.

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tampering has gone on; in that case we have interesting traces of the book Dr. Edman thought he was reading.

From the system-builder *manqué* to the personality *rompu* is an easy step; we have only to look from a reviewer who is a professional critic of system-builders to a reviewer who is a professional personality. That we find him in a magazine that systematically exploits for snob purposes a very profitable mass personality of its own is perhaps no accident: Mr. Auden's piece could only have appeared in *The New Yorker* (April 23, 1949).

If Dr. Edman is doing in a rival medicine man amid the dust of what he conceives to be a strictly professional squabble, Mr. Auden is engaged in a much more exhilarating ritual slaughter of his poetic father. He is looking, that is, not for a doctrine but for a personality, which he anatomizes *con brio*. It is a much more "advanced" review than the former. A visitor to this chromium-plated Heart of Darkness may discover stuck up on posts the dried heads of liberals who, like Dr. Edman, "are frightened by the idea of 'dogma'," as jaunty proof that Mr. Auden had disposed of their kind long ago. On the sand lie Mr. Eliot's bones, scattered and shining, labeled in three classes: (1) The archdeacon, author of the present book; (2) "A violent and passionate old peasant grandmother who . . . has looked into the abyss and, unless restrained, would scream the house down"; (3) "A young boy who likes to play slightly malicious practical jokes." One would never guess that personality no. 2 was once regarded as a great poet; it plays a merely comic part in Mr. Auden's melodramatic finale. Mr. Auden puts up a great display of "chatting and wrangling" with his Archdeacon-puppet, paying it the compliment of being interested in what it says and even assisting it here and there with some peppier language to bring its points home to the smart-as-whips *New Yorker* audience, before whom the dear old fellow must appear ludicrously innocent. That which had been contained in the hollow round of Mr. Eliot's skull appears, however, much as it did *chez* Edman, as an opaque construction of premises, conclusions, and developing theses; and such indigestible portions as Mr. Auden rejects are dismissed as the marginalia of personality No. 3. Thus such a statement as,

> A high average of general education is perhaps less necessary for a civil society than is a respect for learning,

is glossed as "the hotfoot treatment" of "the boyish practical joker, whose favorite sport is teasing Whigs, particularly if they happen to be Americans." But then "civil" is perhaps hardly the word for the society which *The New Yorker* imposes on undergraduates as civilized.

Both reviewers can find on a page only what they know already. What is going on in these two cases is simply this: Dr. Edman and Mr. Auden are each

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constructing books which they can review. Both are haunted by an odd sense that there is really no book there; but a distinguished name is on the dust-cover, and something has to be done. So Dr. Edman, who is a dialectician, acting on a few hints, sets up and dismisses an amateur's exercise in dialectics. Mr. Auden, who is a rhetorician, cued by a few tones and gestures, sets up and guys a *persona* adopted by Mr. Eliot for rhetorical purposes. The difficulty is simply that Mr. Eliot is not a dialectician nor a rhetorician, but in the classical sense a grammarian, as were, for example, Lord Bacon and St. Augustine, bringing all his resources of human knowledge to bear on a focal term.[3] There have been few grammarians since, in the seventeenth century, Descartes, the heir of the thirteenth-century schoolmen, captured philosophy for dialectics, and the poet was left to exploit a rhetorical personality. But neither Mr. Eliot's personality, real or assumed, nor such logical organization as he chooses to employ, is central to the meaning of this book.

The notion that words were counters to be assigned values ("defined") in a book of rules before each new game of solitaire arose at this time: the century after Descartes was the great age of dictionaries and other books which told which words could be used in place of which other words, and philosophy seminars in our own day have been largely reduced to exercises in the definition of terms. Korzybski is in this respect the heir of William of Ockham. The exegetical procedures of the old grammarians relied, on the other hand, on assimilating and juxtaposing bodies of social and psychological fact, to be ingested and digested in all their wealth of analogical interconnections, as a source not of propositions but of positive intellective and affective nutriment. The mind was ordered by contemplating order: the will imposed an analogous order on its acts. The old conception of the moral order and the social order as more or less perfect mirrors of the divine order, an intuition which not only is central for such a figure as Lancelot Andrewes, but sustains everything Mr. Eliot has written, depends on this realistic sense of a complex verbal, social, and moral actuality to be explored rather than pinned down. Eliot's literary criticism depends on this same respect for concrete fact: such a phrase as "dissociation of sensibility" is not a theory but a way of pointing at events and gestures in poems. Those who, like Yvor Winters, cannot get their teeth into anything but articulated doctrine have had to supply a dialectical translation, Edman fashion, before ripping *The Sacred Wood* apart.

Thus to define a word like "Culture" means to focus the whole body of human experience, not ignoring Wensleydale cheese and boiled cabbage cut

[3]As a rough guide to the significance of these terms, one may say that Mr. Eliot reads poetry as a grammarian, Mr. I. A. Richards as a rhetorician, and Mr. Mortimer Adler as a dialectician. The latter two are interested in, respectively, the psychology of the speech-situation, and the paraphrasable "content." Neither can evaluate a poem,

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into sections. The meditations on language in *Four Quartets* are strictly relevant to such an undertaking:

> *Words strain,*
> *Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,*
> *Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,*
> *Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,*
> *Will not stay still.*

"The use of the word *culture* by those who have not, as it seems to me, pondered deeply the meaning of the word before employing it" exemplifies this decay; the remedy is meditation, not trotting out syllogisms and similes. It was Prufrock's fate to be "formulated, sprawling on a pin," but Mr. Eliot's object as grammarian is not to kill his material by imposing on it the conditions of study; rather to contemplate and know the "causes" of a richly existing order, morally accountable, in which, even ideally, "the detail of the pattern is movement."

The reader of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is being invited to assist at a meditation at bottom metaphysical. The famous metaphor of the ideal literary order in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is a metaphysical intuition, analogically valid at many levels, which reappears here in such forms as:

> Every change we make is tending to bring about a new civilization of the nature of which we are ignorant, and in which we should all of us be unhappy. . . . All that a concern for civilization can direct us to do, is to improve such civilization as we have, for we can imagine no other.

With which compare:

> *Fare forward, travellers! Not escaping from the past*
> *Into different lives, or into any future. . . .*
> *You shall not think 'the past is finished'*
> *Or 'the future is before us' . . .*
> *And do not think of the fruit of action.*
> *Fare forward.*

Again,

> But when I think of the family, I have in mind a bond which embraces a longer period of time than this: a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this

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> reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home,[4] it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community. Such an interest in the past is different from the vanities and pretensions of genealogy.

This sense of identity within diversity ("But a lifetime burning in every moment/And not the lifetime of one man only"), of the whole *within* each part (as Joyce made H. C. Earwicker contain multitudes) can only be discussed in terms of the analogy of being as intuited by St. Thomas Aquinas and developed by Cajetan and Sylvester of Ferrara. It is present everywhere in the book:

> Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb.[5] The contrast between religion and culture imposes a strain: we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed in a more primitive stage: as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness.[6] It is only by unremitting effort that we can persist in being individuals in a society, instead of merely members of a disciplined crowd.

This is not a *mystique* but a largely intuitive insight. Thus, the individual is not a cultural atom, "culture" does not exist apart from him, yet cannot be achieved by overhauling him. Like all perfections, the word has analogical meanings at different levels of application, proportioned to the kind of existence exercised by the man, the coterie, or the society. Mr. Eliot is exploring a hierarchy of modes of moral being.

Such a book cannot be paraphrased, nor can a passage be paraphrased, any more than *Four Quartets*, another and higher kind of meditation on the same material, can be paraphrased. Despite the fact that it is not literary criticism, it seems to me Mr. Eliot's most important prose work since *The Sacred Wood*. Doubts about history or logic are irrelevant; it cannot be quarreled with piecemeal because it does not exist at the level of premises and terminology at which useful quarrels are possible. It is a meditation on order, not a program for action. It is because right action issues from ordered knowledge gathered into wisdom that it was relevant in these days for Mr. Eliot to write it.

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[4]Cf. *East Coker*, part V.

[5]Cf. *Difficulties of a Statesman*: "What Shall I cry?/Mother, mother."

[6]Cf. *Burnt Norton* III: "Distracted from distraction by distraction."

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# *The Neo-Classic Drama*

*W. S. MERWIN*

THE CLASSICAL MOMENT, by *Martin Turnell.* New Directions. $4.50.

A NEW STUDY IN ENGLISH of the French classic dramatists which is neither predominantly historical, biographical nor pedantic in purpose, but aims instead at turning attention directly on the works should receive, after the first surprise, careful examination. For the past few years Mr. Turnell's studies on Corneille, Molière and Racine have been appearing in English periodicals, notably in *Scrutiny.* Both he and Mr. Francis Fergusson* feel the necessity to preface their studies with remarks on the neglected position of French classic drama in the paraphernalia of contemporary English and American tastes. Yet I should imagine that any attempt toward a live contemporary poetic drama would find the French classic theater an essential part of its basis, an exemplar perhaps more direct in its uses than either Greek tragedy or Shakespeare. Essays of appreciation miss the purpose; the work of both these men offers valuable analysis and conviction, confronts both the prejudice and the creative possibility and proceeds to the work in question squarely, with perception and intelligence. In discussing the book I have spent most time on the Corneille study because I felt that, while it leaves most to be desired, much of the lack could be suggested in passing. The work on Molière enters an able tradition of Molière criticism. But we have so far to go in the study of Racine that the best I could do was to indicate possible further directions.

The examination of all that can be called 'form' should take primacy in any capable study of writers so formally conscious as these. Mr. Turnell's work is certainly capable, yet much of the historical material might have been assumed; and the purpose of the study, while never lost from sight, occasionally blurs toward a somewhat vague 'historical understanding.' There should be no quarrel with Mr. Turnell's rhetoric, except in a few instances where it threatens to take over and avert the tools of investigation. One does not, at present, in the middle of an argument and by way of a buttressing example, mention *Paradise Lost* as "the 'Christian epic' which betrays in every line his (Milton's) utter disbelief in the fundamental tenets of the Christian system." But such shooting in the dark is neither frequent nor generally damaging.

If we take as starting point T. E. Hulme's suggestion that "man is the chaos highly organized, but liable to revert to chaos at any moment" we might understand Corneille as concerning himself principally with the means

*"Action as Rational: Racine's Bérénice" by Francis Fergusson, THE HUDSON REVIEW, Summer 1948.

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and possibilities of organization and Racine with the inevitability and suddenness of reversion. (Molière's relation to such a thesis remains necessarily ambiguous). Of the three we find Corneille most obscured by time, and Mr. Turnell has devoted a comparatively larger fraction of his study of Corneille to indicating, arranging, evaluating certain dominant points in the history of Corneille's reputation. But he limits too closely his own study of Corneille by commencing with a statement of the need for considering Corneille as, above all, an 'heroic poet.' One wishes he had used the phrase as a piece of summary rather than as a main direction, for there is in the work of Corneille no comparatively direct and uniform development of means and range as there is in Racine or Molière, and if we start with a view to considering any aspect of his work, even the most central, as paramount, we seriously risk missing much of the achievement. This, I think, in the case of Corneille, is what Mr. Turnell has done. And his most succinct description of the term 'heroic' neither informs that term so that it might reveal the particulars of Corneille's work, nor modifies it to state the nature of the achievement:

> It should be apparent by now in what sense Corneille is an heroic poet. It has nothing to do with declamation and bombast (though there is plenty of both in his work), nor with the misleading theory that his characters are 'supermen.' It simply means that by a combination of insight and will power the moral values which Corneille derived from close contact with his class are raised to a high level of poetic intensity.

Except for the statement that declamation and bombast have 'nothing to do with' Corneille's use of the heroic convention, the description fits. But it includes as well as a good many achievements quite un-heroic in any Cornelian sense. And after much fine quotation and discussion of the verse Mr. Turnell leaves us as far as ever from knowing what relation the "poetic intensity" to which the moral values are raised bears to the poetry in which it becomes articulate. But it must be conceded that precisely this relation is the center of our problems concerning poetic drama, and that the best anyone can hope for is a usable suggestion.

There is little doubt that *Cinna* or *Polyeucte* (Mr. Turnell posits the latter) assume among Corneille's works the greatest final stature. The criticisms cited are helpful—the remark of Saint-Beuve, for example:

> . . . if *Polyeucte* moves us and carries us away it is because something of the kind is and remains possible to human nature when assisted by grace. I will go further than this. If the genius of Corneille was capable of producing *Polyeucte* at this time, it was because there was still something in his surroundings (whether Corneille himself was aware of it or not) which matched its spirit and achieved the same miracles.

This is the sort of remark we can put to all the uses it suggests. And Mr. Turnell's own somewhat scattered comments on *Polyeucte* do not disappoint

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their aims. But Mr. Turnell might well have challenged somewhat more elaborately Croce's "invitation to us to discard Corneille's four most famous tragedies and to discover the true Corneille—Corneille the Poet—in the final plays." Both Croce and Mr. Turnell are bent on selling short some part of Corneille's work in the interest of some other part. Croce's attitude is the more dangerous and limiting, but it is immediately provocative, and, among contemporary readers of Corneille, probably more representative than solitary. We are often seduced by complexity as though it were a criterion, and a play such as *Nicomède* with its intricacies of morals-as-politics looks at a glance more our meat than much of Corneille's earlier work. A genuine challenge to Croce's attitude would have involved careful examination of one of the late plays—an examination which should have shed light on the rest of Corneille's work. What Mr. Turnell finds crude in the later plays, what he complains of as "blunting of the psychological insight" often appears to me as a broadening of Corneille's perception. The "psychology" submerges itself, its articulation becomes indirect; the remarked "crude" bareness masks at times greater wealth of implication than I find in much of the earlier work. Mr. Turnell's objection to *Polyeucte*—

> . . . the religion was not inevitable, but any other motif might have produced an equally great play.

touches precisely one of the dramatic means Corneille labors into strength in some of the later work. In such plays as *Rodogune* and *Nicomède* the *motifs* sink deeper in the web of character and situation until the force of their own fine intricacies helps make the action inevitable. Corneille's later touch was less sure; the late works are less significant to the whole accomplishment. But it should be considered whether the material of which he availed himself was not expanding, the directions of his work pointing out greater range, even while his powers of execution were failing. Mr. Turnell's preference for the early plays is justified, but the preference dare not ignore the later work if the study pretends to any kind of completeness. If Mr. Turnell will attempt no summary discrimination with regard to Corneille, his examination of the work should be less wilfully partial or better integrated in its direction.

The work on Molière is better organized as an historical study, and the probing into the plays, going deeper, brings up more. Certainly Molière's work, among other things, is "a study of some of the chief social maladies, not only of his own, but of all time, seen against the background of a stable order." But the form of articulation the work takes includes a good deal more than the study itself. The values handled are raised differently to "poetic intensity." A temptation to take the work's "psychological" perspectives for finally significant form is more dangerous to a consideration of Molière than to a consideration of either Corneille or Racine. Such perspectives can at best only partake of the structure they sustain, and, in work like Molière's this is, in fact, what

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we ask of them. But if we lose sight of the structure they serve we are no longer considering the work or anything near it, but a report, clinical and unconnected, of the irrelevant actions of nonexistent characters. Mr. Turnell makes good use of the psychological approach. His study of *Le Misanthrope* presents as much valuable material for consideration as any analysis of the play I know; he has recognized and satisfied the need for extremely agile discrimination. Several directions of observation prompt such remarks as "Alceste is convinced that there has been a miscarriage of justice; but instead of trying to set it right he is delighted at the loss of his suit because it gives him a *right* to fulminate against human nature, and this right seems cheap at twenty thousand francs." Yet the remarks do not involve digressions and the final summaries are well-balanced.

But Mr. Turnell's study drops most thoroughly the gestures of description to assume the burden of analysis and conclusion in the work on Racine. The ground Mr. Turnell covers in discussing Molière was half-travelled to begin with, and Molière has not been so cluttered by generations of academic, theatrical and miscellaneous unattached shoddiness as has Racine. If we return to the statement of Hulme we see that the first part of the phrase, "man is the chaos highly organized," implies, "and liable to revert to chaos at any moment," while the latter part suggests the former. Those values which Corneille had labored with in their formation, Racine could assume to a depth where they could be considered as almost stable, almost whole. The necessity, the provocations and concerns of disintegration are seen most clearly where the original order was most nearly complete. Racine could not, nor can we, proceed simply to consider the organization as specious. A false order would not contain but be its own process of reversion. A judgment of any order will involve consideration of how much is contained in balance how well, of how strong the form can remain while allowing all possible variations. Racine both condemns and affirms the order he presents; the tools of condemnation in his hands assume their own summary and unimpeachable order. Within the framework the dramatist's perception proceeds to its constructive discriminations. Mr. Turnell notes, for example:

> . . . there is a distinction between *droits* and *lois*, between natural human "rights" and inhuman "laws." The distinction is a vital one and is apparent in all Racine's work. . . . The dilemma lies in the fact that though "laws" are incapable of providing a constructive solution of the problems which confronted Racine's contemporaries, they were the only barrier against anarchy. . . . The choice lies between legalism and disaster, between an "insensibility," which excludes natural "rights," and a "shameful yoke." In a tragic world the person who desires no more than his natural rights follows the road to destruction.

*Phèdre* and *Athalie* are the greatest examples. In the former play the crisis of reversion is developed with all subtlety and elegance within the frame of the

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form. In the latter the "crisis" is a continual affair, both organization and disintegration going on at once in the precarious human politic. *Athalie*, as Mr. Turnell has recognized, is something apart, something deserving the most exhaustive future examination. His own study of the play is adequate and useful within its aims. But it is the study of *Phèdre* on which he has spent most attention and done most valuable work.

I do not find *Phèdre* "shot through with the doctrines of predestination and original sin," and, with due notice given its ingenuity I cannot accept Mr. Turnell's opening discussion of the theological nature of evil in the play. Among Racine's works *Phèdre* and *Athalie* in particular are peculiarly un-Christian: the salvation, even where possible, is sullied and threatened in such a way as to scarcely be worth its cost. The moral weight of the play is no less great for the fact that Phèdre's stature does not diminish as she accomplishes her own condemnation. On the other hand her crimes morally destroy those about her: Oenone becomes small in the scope of her own malice; Hippolyte's weaknesses override the careful nurturing of his incidental strengths; Aricie was fated to pay for whatever she gained more than its worth in damage and disorder. And Thésée's heroisms all abandon him—an old man suddenly poor, tired, betrayed by all he valued. The spectacle of others suffering the loss of stature that attends one's own crimes is an evidence of human helplessness to control the human process. But the fate which informs the play, from which Phèdre sees there is no escape, bears little relation to Jansenist predestination. The involved characters partake of the inevitability, give it flesh and moment. And "original sin" is a myth that haunts any construct where the nature of man is shown to be necessarily faulty and innocence is admittedly impossible. It is a term which often pretends darkly to rumor a good deal more than it can relevantly say. Hippolyte's own sudden revelation:

*Je me suis engagé trop avant.*
*Je vois que la raison cède à la violence.*

indicates what key there may be to the moral paradox. Once the situation begins to move, the participants are committed by all their actions, and by those of the protagonist, and the commitment destroys what weapons might be used against it. Revelation of this kind in tragedy may contain at once the salvation and the inevitable damnation of character. Phèdre herself comes to confront a similar realization; then her actions carry her along intact and she is fearfully aware of the destination.

We are familiar, of course, with this sort of discussion of the moral notions informing a work, in Shakespeare criticism. It is somewhat less plentiful in French and I think we might with profit examine Racine with all the means that have been developed for Shakespeare. Mr. Turnell has discussed the organization of *Phèdre* in some detail, and the more consideration this material receives, especially at so honest and perceptive a level as Mr. Turnell's, the better. But investigation of the diction—I use the word to include everything or-

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ganized and everything of the organization from the sounds of the words to the patterned actions of the speakers—owes most of late to such work as Jean-Louis Barrault's edition of *Phèdre* for the theater.

For we should approach Racine's work at once from the theatrical and moral ends. We tend to lose sight of an impersonal idiom capable of presenting "characters" as different yet as coherent and central as Joad, Abner, Athalie in *Athalie,* and Phèdre, Hippolyte, Oenone, Thésée in *Phedre.* We are not sufficiently aware of the extent to which our vision is maimed by the loss of such a genre. The novel, even at its best, safely avoids the central problems of dramatic articulation and the kinds of meaning possible to a strict and "arbitrary" form. Lyric poetry can embrace only so much, and we watch its roots become increasingly tenuous. We tend to press the functions of criticism to all kinds of unprecedented uses and may be successful, but only in a partial and stop-gap fashion. I do not think I am needlessly confusing our responsibilities to the past and present in believing that we have more to learn from Racine than from Freud, from the aims and means of Corneille than from our varied and insistent anthropological-sociologies, from the maturity of Molière than from Kafka's infatuation with failure. The discovery of the manner in which we can proceed with such learning will be part of the job itself, and if we can hopefully trust the convictions of those few (for example Mr. Fergusson) seriously interested in a resurrection of poetic drama, such a work as Mr. Turnell's is a most valuable first step.

## *Poetry Transatlantic*

*WALTER McELROY*

NEW BRITISH POETS, An Anthology, edited by *Kenneth Rexroth.* New Directions. $3.00.

SELECTED POEMS, by *Elizabeth Daryush.* Selected, and with a Foreword, by *Yvor Winters.* The Swallow Press and William Morrow. $2.50.

COLLECTED POEMS OF WILLIAM EMPSON. Harcourt, Brace. $2.50.

THE EDGE OF BEING, by *Stephen Spender.* Random House. $2.50.

POEMS 1943-1947, by *C. Day Lewis.* Oxford. $2.75.

HOLES IN THE SKY, Poems 1944-1947, by *Louis MacNeice.* Random House. $2.50.

A CELEBRATION FOR EDITH SITWELL, edited by *José Garcia Villa.* New Directions. $1.50.

THE SONG OF THE COLD, by *Edith Sitwell.* Vanguard. $2.75.

THE MOST RECENT WINNER of the Nobel Prize for Literature found it, not long ago, "a matter of course" that nowadays new poetry, whether published

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in London or New York, should win an audience on both sides of the Atlantic. I cannot speak for readers on Mr. Eliot's adopted side: perhaps they welcome poetry from across the ocean as readily as if the cultural distance between shores were no greater than the physical in this air-minded age. But to cross that distance in the other direction, I am afraid, still usually takes a voyage slower than a sailing ship's; and at the end of it, poetry which comes speaking the King's English is apt to find us armed against it with all the prejudices of a cultural nationalism still self-consciously rebellious, as if we were Continentals on the lookout for redcoats yet—or else, for we have our Tories too, to be conducted across the lines with somewhat too fawning obeisance. Poetry has still to be granted by us the dual citizenship to which our common language entitles it.

That British poetry is no longer the exclusive monopoly of Auden, Spender, Lewis, MacNeice & Co. (if it ever was, as only our too carefully preserved unsophistication could have led us to believe) ought not now to be news, a decade after Auden's transfer to America; if it continues to be reported as such, the reason must be partly that Spender, Lewis, and MacNeice have remained almost the only British poets whose work has appeared in America almost simultaneously with its publication in England. The wartime boom in poetry publishing of the earlier 1940's has brought us, to be sure, a little of the work of F. T. Prince, W. R. Rodgers, Henry Reed, Bernard Spencer, and Vernon Watkins, along with somewhat more by others whose claims on our attention seem less uncontestable; but none of these has been received with the fanfare that greeted Auden and his colleagues more than a decade ago—a fanfare we have not heard repeated until just now, to welcome Miss Edith Sitwell's visit to the United States. And even the wartime boom has failed to bring us much of the best: a poet of such commanding and long-recognized importance as Edwin Muir goes unpublished, along with younger poets as good as David Gascoyne or Lawrence Durrell—and we are only now, a decade late, presented with the work of William Empson. Little wonder, then, if our impressions of developments in British poetry remain out-of-date and disconnected.

To round them out would seem to be the purpose one might have hoped for in an anthology such as Mr. Rexroth's, which aims "to represent the work of those British poets who have come to prominence since 1937 as extensively as possible" (1937 having been chosen as the date at which "a change of taste, a reaction, set in" against Auden and his associates); but I am afraid that purpose—unless the reader performs for himself the critical labors which Mr. Rexroth has avoided, both in his introduction and in his selection of poems—must remain unachieved. His representation of the new British poets —no less than seventy of them—is more extensive than I, for one, would have thought possible; perhaps these seventy do not literally include every poet who has ever contributed to one of the astonishingly numerous verse periodicals

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which sprang up in wartime Britain: there may be omissions, but not many; certainly one need not worry about them. To reproach him for over-generosity when I have only just bewailed the stingy ration of British verse provided us by American publishers may seem a contradiction, but I find too much no substitute for too little. Under Mr. Rexroth's egalitarian dispensation, the laws of economics still operate: bad money tends to drive out good as usual in his commonwealth of poets. His three hundred pages of verse offer some good poems, of course. I suggest that the reader look at the work of Kenneth Allott, Lawrence Durrell, G. S. Fraser, Roy Fuller, David Gascoyne, Kathleen Raine, Anne Ridler, D. S. Savage, and Terence Tiller—to cite a few of the better poets represented whose names are still little known here because their work has appeared only in anthologies, if at all. But too many of Mr. Rexroth's seventy are mere purveyors of the run-of-the-mill commodity which stocks the less discriminating periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic. I choose at random this, which happens to be by Alex Comfort ("The Postures of Love"):

*In the stony night move the stars' white mouths*
*a net of mouths is looking for food*
*I think we are their food*

*they will unlock our fingers, even if we lie*
*closer than bone to bone—closer than the grave's*
*white tangled dancers. . . .*

There is a good deal more of this sort of thing, reminiscent of nothing so much as the fashionably morbid graveyard poeticising of the 1840's in America, and scarcely any more effective in its efforts to warm to life the unburied corpse of the Romantic Movement.

Although Mr. Rexroth assures us in his introduction that his "is not a Romantic collection, in the sense of being weighted in favor of that tendency," he takes up the cudgels (a little too eagerly to leave us in doubt concerning his allegiance) for that latterly fashionable version of Romanticism whose prophets are D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. To accuse him of arguing that the only way a poet can have written a good poem since 1937 is to have adopted his own present (1949) program, whose planks one presumes are anarchism, pacifism, and "personalism," would be no doubt to over-simplify his position, which one need not do: it is already, I am afraid, over-simplified. Mr. Rexroth's introduction tells us in more or less Sunday-magazine-section style (but less smoothly: his prose tends toward the spasmodic) quite a bit about British literary politics, a lively subject; one might be deceived, were he not known to be a Californian, into mistaking him for a past participant in those controversies he pictures so melodramatically as sweeping the British Isles: his anti-Auden fervor, accompanied by an anti-Marxist one which so far out-Audens Auden himself as almost to make us confuse him with Marx,

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seems surprisingly personal. But concerning poetry itself he is less informative. And I suspect the better of the new British poets, at least when they are being poets, are not as concerned with the political or metaphysical fashions of the moment as Mr. Rexroth makes out.

If Mr. Rexroth's introduction suffers from an excess of contemporaneity, that of Yvor Winters to his selection of poems by Elizabeth Daryush may be said to suffer from the lack of it. Mr. Winters evidently would persuade us, forgetting the poetic developments not only of the last ten years but even of the last forty, to remove to some timeless realm where poetry, divested of its mortal coils, shines forth as a kind of Platonic archetype. I am unpersuaded: Mr. Winters' argument for the forty-six poems he has chosen from the nine volumes of verse (now out of print even in England) published by the daughter of the late Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges—an argument that appears to discover their merit largely in their very lack of that ambiguity we are accustomed to expect of serious contemporary verse ("Unlike so many of the poets of our time, she never seems to say more than she means . . . ")—fails to convince me of their timelessness. The experiments of Mrs. Daryush in the use of syllabic meters, cited by Mr. Winters in contention of her technical finesse, as much as they may have sharpened her aural sensitivity—certainly her work's most apparent virtue, for I can find in it neither the vivid imagery nor the concentrated diction he praises—seem nevertheless halting indeed by comparison with, for instance, Marianne Moore's extraordinarily more effective ones. To support his estimate of Mrs. Daryush as "one of the few distinguished poets of our century and a poet who can take her place without apology in the company of Campion and Herrick," Mr. Winters adduces ten poems which "alone would suffice" for proof. Here are the first two stanzas of one of them, "November" (VI):

*Faithless familiars,*
*summer-friends untrue,*
*once-dear beguilers,*
*now wave ye adieu:*

*swift warmth and beauty*
*who awhile had won*
*my glad company,*
*I see you pass on.*

I shall content myself with quoting merely the first stanza of "To Blossoms," by no means one of Herrick's best:

*Faire pledges of a fruitfull Tree,*
*Why do yee fall so fast?*
*Your date is not so past;*
***But you may stay yet here a while,***

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*To blush and gently smile;*
*And go at last.*

I leave the choice to others. Poetry in our day may be, as Mr. Winters says it is, "a debauch, a form of self-indulgence, or a form of self-advertisement": I am half-persuaded by the overly abundant evidence of Mr. Rexroth's miscellany that he is right; but then, uncomfortably, I cannot help but ponder on the sense of his remark that poetry "as an art is an anomaly at present, an anachronism . . . " Surely he cannot mean that poetry, to be an art, *must* be an anachronism?

To turn from the *Selected Poems* of Mrs. Daryush to the *Collected Poems of William Empson* is to hurdle in one stride the whole evolution of "modern" poetry from the first decade of the century. What we have here is what we should expect of the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: poems which need to be explored (as Mr. Winters disdains to explore those of Mrs. Daryush) "word by word, in the fashion of the day, with loving attention to actuality, potentiality, and ambiguity." To equip us for the exploration, we have Mr. Empson's extensive notes, which ought, in their "willingness to explain incidental difficulties," to dispel any suspicion that the well-known obscurities of these poems are obstacles set up merely for the reader's bafflement. The difficulties arise, of course, because "there is no longer a reasonably small field which may be taken as general knowledge"; either the poet falsifies actual experience by pretending otherwise, or else he tries to take account of our world's expanding complexity. The measure of Mr. Empson's accomplishment is that his poems take account of so much. I can think of few poets in our time who have come to grips with more of actuality. Who else, beginning a poem—a lyric poem, not a satire—with the line "And now she cleans her teeth into the lake," could even lift it off the ground, let alone lift it with easy assurance to "skies/ Whose vaults are opened to achieve the Lord"? The obscurities are at least the result of hard trying, not of the lack of it.

What shall one find to say now of poems so long and deservedly famous as "Legal Fiction" or "This Last Pain" or "Missing Dates"—of these and others already explored "with loving attention" by any number of critics and even imitated by a younger generation of poets (American, at least, if not British)? From such already familiar anthology pieces the American reader will extend, I hope, his explorations to others of the shorter poems, such as "The World's End," "Part of Mandevil's Travels," "Arachne," "China," and "Sonnet"; to that rattling good long didactic poem, "Autumn on Nan-Yueh," so revelatory of a rich and various and humorous intelligence; and to "Bacchus," perhaps the most difficult (it rates the most extensive note) of these poems but worth the difficulty, progressing with sustained magnificence from beginning:

*The laughing god born of a startling answer*
*(Cymbal of clash in the divided glancer*

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*Forcing from heaven's the force of earth's desire)*
*Capped a retort to sublime earth by fire*

to end:

*And rang like bells the vaults and the dark arches.*

To future literary historians, Empson's work may well seem the apogee of modernism in Anglo-American poetry. Apogee implies elevation, implies flight. Again and again one must be impressed by the air-mindedness of Empson's imagery. "Autumn on Nan-Yueh," for instance, begins:

*If flight's as general as this*
*And every movement starts a wing*
*("Turn but a stone," the poet found*
*Winged angels crawling that could sting),*
*Eagles by hypothesis*
*And always taking a new fling,*
*Scorners eternal of the ground*
*And all the rocks where one could cling,*
*We obviously give a miss*
*To earth and all that kind of thing,*
*And cart our Paradise around*
*Or all that footless birds can bring.*

This scorn "eternal of the ground" is constantly asserted in a readiness to abandon "all the rocks where one could cling" for the air. "Reflection from Anita Loos" makes the point: "It is not human to feel safely placed" and "Reflection from Rochester" enlarges upon it. Flight becomes the kind of metaphor, capable of almost infinite expansion, which will serve to contain the poet's whole imagination. The cultural distance from one side of the Atlantic to another must shrink, surely, for a poetry such as this, which ought to cross it in a single hop: we need only provide the landing facilities.

*Collected Poems* adds, regrettably, but three short pieces written since 1940 to the contents of Mr. Empson's two earlier volumes, published in England in 1935 and 1940.

*. . . But oh*
*That lovely balcony is lost*
*Just as the mountains take the snow*

—so ended, ten uneasy years ago, the autumn on his holy peak, in the face of armed invasion, and he has seldom since taken to poetic flight: too cautious an aerial navigator, perhaps, to attempt to fly without bearings. Not so his contemporary of the 1930's, Stephen Spender, whose latest resort to wing impels him right up to, and even beyond (I find his latest volume aptly titled) *The Edge of Being*. Mr. Spender charts for us in his opening poem, "O Omega, Invocation," the course of his stratospheric progress into those Shelleyan realms

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which we must, I suppose (if we take seriously Mr. Rexroth's prediction of a neo-Romantic movement), expect future poets to explore:

*Passing from earth into a sky*
*Drained of last wings,*
*Then beyond the empyrean blue*
*Passing passing through light*
*Into space too white for seeing—*

Language proves a frail vehicle to withstand the pressures of these upper altitudes: "O thou, word of beginning/Oh with what wordless end." The interplanetary rocket which will protect its pilot from atomization at such heights has not yet, I am afraid, been invented. What drives Mr. Spender to such cosmic wanderings is explained (only too explicitly, perhaps) in the closing poem, "Time in Our Time":

*Oh, though the Past dissolve, may all that was*
*Once idea integrated into stone*
*Enter my secret mind at the whirling centre*
*Of the external storm: and combine with*
*A love which penetrates through falling flesh*
*To paint the image in my heart*
*Of that past greatness and that once-willed Future,*
*Beyond the storm, which still can make a world.*

As Empson, that past master of the art of getting off the ground, has reminded us on the subject of risings: "It is on contradiction that they grow." They grow, he says: not by flight away from contradiction, that is, does one surmount it. Difficult it may be, as Mr. Spender seems to have found, to "hold onto the world," this "turning wheel," and not be "hurled/Beyond evil and good"—but the only successful poems I find in *The Edge of Being* are those in which he makes the effort. ("The pilgrims fly because they plod," Mr. Empson has observed of the worshippers ascending Nan-Yueh.) A slow journey by foot takes Mr. Spender more surely—in "On the Third Day"—to the mountaintop, just as a look up, with his feet on the ground, takes him more surely—in "Responsibility: The Pilots Who Destroyed Germany, Spring, 1945"—into the sky, than all his high flying—and perhaps the most moving lines in his book are those of "Returning to Vienna, 1947" (Part VII) in which, neither climbing nor looking up but "sicklied under rubble," he knows

*The shame of what I never was*
*That when I lived my life among these dead*
*I did not live enough—*
*that when I loved*
*Among these dead—I did not love enough—*
*That when I looked the murderers in their eyes*
*I did not die enough—*

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For further evidence of the dangers of a flight away from contradiction one has but to consult the latest volume, *Poems 1943-1947*, of C. Day Lewis. "All Gone," for instance, drags us down, down with a sinking cadence from aerial heights to ocean bottom:

*The sea drained off, my poverty's uncovered—*
*Sand, sand, a rusted anchor, broken glass,*
*The listless sediment of sparkling days.*

His youthful rebelliousness well behind him, the author of a "A Time to Dance" is revealed to us now as middle-aged, resolving "To live the present . . . not to live for it—" but unable, apparently, to carry out his resolution with much enthusiasm, for his present is almost wholly devoted to nostalgic brooding over the past: lost youth, palling passion, frustrated expectancy. The tediums of the Romantic dilemma have so weighed him down that he can only intone the weary refrain of Mr. Rexroth's funeral chorus:

*When heart and mind agree they kiss*
*Over an opening grave*

—and there is no escaping from them. "Enwombed" as in a bathysphere observing, "affrighted, / Gay fluent forms of life," "The Neurotic" "dares not break the bubble and be drowned." "Enwombed" would seem to be the key word: Mr. Lewis' quest for a refuge from the present has carried him all the way back to the era of Mrs. Daryush, whose comforting poeticisms—"aye" and "aught," "statue sublime," "Twice, thrice had I found it"—we find him clinging to. At times he seems aware of his plight:

*. . . And though my todays are*
*Repetitive, dull, disjointed,*
*I must continue to practice them over and over*
*Like a five-finger exercise,*
*Hoping my hands at last will suddenly flower with*
*Passion, and harmonize.*

But I am afraid he will need more than five-finger exercises (as even his translation of Paul Valéry's *Le Cimetière Marin*, here included, regrettably indicates) to keep his hand in.

Louis MacNeice has kept his spirits in better tune—and along with them, his much-applauded technical virtuosity—in the face of those dilemmas of recent history which seem to have thrown some of his contemporaries off key. For a revelation of his secret ("Strike the right note / And the wine-glasses will ring") we may look to "The Stygian Banks," longest and most explicitly philosophical of the poems in *Holes in the Sky*:

*. . . our despair*
*Need not exhaust, it is our privilege—*
*Our paradox—to recognize the insoluble*
*And going up with an outstretched hand salute it.*

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Despite its occasional penetrating insights and its conversational grace throughout, I find "The Stygian Banks," as I have found Mr. MacNeice's longer poems in the past, less convincing than his shorter ones. But I suspect the best of these, in this as in his earlier volumes, may entitle him to a place in literature perhaps a little higher than the one he lets us guess he assigns himself (in "Elegy for Minor Poets") among those

*Who often found their way to pleasant meadows*
*Or maybe once to a peak . . .*

His "pleasant meadows" remain, unlike those of Mr. Day Lewis, pleasant—although sought with an equal nostalgia. The mood of his casual wanderings may be one of disenchantment:

*For now the time of gifts is gone—*
*O boys that grow, O snows that melt,*
*O bathos that the years must fill—*
*Here is dull earth to build upon*
*Undecorated; we have reached*
*Twelfth Night or what you will . . . you will.*

Happily such laments for the passage of "the time of gifts" may be figuratively interpreted: the gifts remain. Dull earth, in poems like "Woods," "Carrick Revisited," and "The Strand," is resourcefully decorated. They confront us with the delicately sensitive equilibrium of center and circumference—of his sense of himself and his sense of reality—which enables Mr. MacNeice (unlike Mr. Day Lewis, disabled by his lack of it) to treat nostalgic sentiments without sentimentality. Not thought in the 1930's to be so socially significant a poet as his contemporaries, Auden, Spender, Day Lewis, whose political convictions were more openly avowed, he seems to me today to show in poems like "No More Sea," "Aftermath," and "Place of a Skull" perhaps the most penetrating intuition of social realities of them all, except Auden—though one not so penetrating as Mr. Empson's: he is not given to flight, and so rises less easily to peaks for his vantage point. No, he prefers to saunter—and not so much through "pleasant meadows," really, as through city streets: "The perfect urban poet," as Mr. Rexroth labels him—but I cannot (as Mr. Rexroth seems to) find that label a reproach, not with a poem such as "Autolycus" (which gives us Shakespeare "gabbing earth / Hot from Eastcheap") fresh in mind:

*O master pedlar with your confidence tricks,*
*Brooches, pomanders, broadsheets and what-have-you,*
*Who hawk such entertainment . . .*

If Mr. MacNeice's gait is an easy saunter, Edith Sitwell's must be described, I suppose, as a stately parade—attended, of course, by such demonstrations as *A Celebration for Edith Sitwell on the Occasion of her Visit to the United States,* whose fanfare of huzzas by seventeen admirers need not, since the occasion for it has now passed, detain us long. All of these (excepting Miss

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Sitwell's brother, Sir Osbert, who limits himself to personal reminiscence, and Gertrude Stein, whose "Sitwell Edith Sitwell" says whatever one wishes to hear it say) have more or less the same argument to make about Miss Sitwell's late work: they find it unqualifiedly great. Arthur Waley is virtually alone in stating a reservation: he finds that the comparative poverty of Miss Sitwell's Death mythology "has had a handicapping effect on many of her recent poems, making as it does for a too frequent repetition of the same words and images." Needless to say, the minority of British critics who have stated more serious reservations are not represented. The contributors appear for the most part to side with Miss Sitwell herself, who disclaims—as Horace Gregory informs us—"the relevance of all critical 'fashions' to poetry . . ."

One does not like to be accused of irrelevance: I shall therefore limit my inquiry into the relevance to current "critical 'fashions'" of Miss Sitwell's later work (selections from which appear both in the volume already mentioned and in *The Song of the Cold*) to the observation that its enthusiastic reception in England—probably the most enthusiastic accorded any poetry of the past decade—is our most manifest symptom of that anti-Auden reaction, that change of taste noted for us by Mr. Rexroth; secondly, to quotation of Frederic Prokosch, one of the two American contributors to the celebration volume: "Edith Sitwell's poems of the last several years . . . employ a flowing, opulent, declamatory manner and meter, which I should think would be particularly alien to contemporary American taste." I think Mr. Prokosch may be right, or would have been two or three years ago: perhaps American taste, too, has begun to change.

The movement away, in her later work, from the tightly controlled experimentalism of the earlier poems may be noted by comparison of "Gold Coast Customs," written twenty years ago:

> *Now under the cannibal*
> *Sun is spread*
> *The black rhinoceros-hide of the mud*
> *For endlessness and timelessness . . . dead*
> *Grass creaks like a carrion-bird's voice . . .*

with "The Shadow of Cain":

> *The gulf that was torn across the world seemed as if the beds*
> *of all the Oceans*
> *Were emptied . . . Naked, and gaping at what once had been*
> *the Sun,*
> *Like the mouth of the universal Famine,*
> *It stretched its jaws from one end of the Earth to the other.*

Presumptuous though it may be of me (in the face of advice such as that of one of Miss Sitwell's celebrators, Kenneth Clark: "Anyone writing about Miss Sitwell would be wise to avoid technical questions, for he can certainly not

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bring to them the knowledge and the delicacy of perception which she has shown . . . "), I find the second example inferior to the first—as I find much of the later work inferior technically to the earlier, its long, loose sprawling lines relaxed to the point of negligence. The "comparative poverty," in Arthur Waley's phrase, of its imagery generally (not only of its Death mythology) is justified—for me, not convincingly—by Stephen Spender on the grounds that Miss Sitwell's invocation of "the same images again and again . . . makes us thoroughly acquainted with the notes of her instrument"—but one can be too thoroughly acquainted, perhaps, to go on listening with interest. To my ear the late poems tend to run together into a kind of monody without beginning or end. But it is of course for the richer content much more than for the richer technique they discover in them that Miss Sitwell's admirers have chiefly praised her recent poems. That the author of "Elegy for Dead Fashion" should now have become the author of "Three Poems for the Atomic Age" has been found remarkable: I find the subjects different, the attitudes toward them less so. Miss Sitwell understands (so Maurice Bowra tells us) the longing for that "consoling/Darkness when all men are equal,—the wrong and the right/And the rich and the poor are no longer separate nations.— / They are brothers in night." Nevertheless he assures us himself that "she does not ultimately share it or admit that it is right." And to me, his immediately following observation —that her answer to "the cry of the outcasts" is "the call of the warm earth in spring to forget their misery . . . "—a little too abruptly calls to mind Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake." But to note some failings is not to deny all virtues in Miss Sitwell's later achievement, which at its best conveys a vision more deeply felt than that of her earlier poems. I like myself the least grandiose of the later ones best—best of all, I think, "The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age," in which she seems to me to speak for herself:

*Great golden Alexander and his thunder-store*
*Are now no more*
*Than the armored knight who buzzed on the windowpane*
*And the first drops of rain.*

*He lies in sleep . . . But still beneath a thatch*
*Of hair like sunburnt grass, the thieving sweet thoughts move*
*Toward the honey-hive . . .*

and so to speak more humanly than in some of the poems which make bolder claims to speak for humanity at large.

But I am far from sure that in the long run the new poetic trend will follow quite as devotedly in Miss Sitwell's wake as her recent attendants—Mr. Spender, for instance, and I suppose Mr. Day Lewis, along with a miscellany of Mr. Rexroth's versifiers. A reaction against the convoluted and tightly knit verse, perhaps too fraught with ambiguities, of the past (whose most striking

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exponent was Mr. Empson, actually, as much as Mr. Auden) has been inevitable: too much tension, in poetry as in any organism, cries for relaxation. Perhaps Mr. MacNeice, more gracefully than most, has known how to relax just enough to achieve a poetry easier in manner, less intellectualized, more flexible; but along with him there have been others, whom Mr. Rexroth might have served us better by bringing more enthusiastically to our attention: G. S. Fraser, Roy Fuller, Lawrence Durrell, Norman Nicholson, F. T. Prince, Kathleen Raine, Henry Reed, Anne Ridler, Terence Tiller, Vernon Watkins, for instance. Nonetheless I shall give Mr. Empson, after all, the last word:

*It is an aeronautic feat*
*Called soaring, makes you quite a star*
*(The Queen and Alice did) to try*
*And keep yourself just where you are*

—advice which, like most of Empson's, one may interpret in two ways at least (if not more): as ridicule or as eulogy—the former for such as fall back from the present in a flutter of poetic wing-flapping, the latter for such as quite naturally take to the air to keep up with it.

# *Hell on Earth: Six Versions*

*VERNON YOUNG*

NINETEEN STORIES, by *Graham Greene*. The Viking Press. $2.75.
IF I WERE YOU, by *Julian Green*. Harper & Brothers. $3.00.
ALL HALLOWS' EVE, by *Charles Williams*. Pellegrini & Cudahy. $2.75.
DESCENT INTO HELL, by *Charles Williams*. Pellegrini & Cudahy. $2.75.
ON THIS SIDE NOTHING, by *Alex Comfort*. The Viking Press. $2.50.
THE HEAT OF THE DAY, by *Elizabeth Bowen*. Alfred A. Knopf. $3.00.

THE PRECARIOUS STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY and the extrusive urge of religious experience, features of existence at any time subject to perplexity, assume desperate proportions in a world committed, as ours has been for thirty-five years, to crises involving mass destitution and death. The five European novelists, here briefly examined, are all deeply concerned with the boundaries and claims of the ego, either in mundane or ultra-mundane terms. From the hopeless delinquents of Graham Greene to Elizabeth Bowen's self-possessed lady of conscience, all may be said to have a rendezvous with death, or its penultimate condition; the barricades are disputed according to the weapons provided.

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The nineteen stories of Graham Greene, "by-products of a novelist's career," 1929-1948, are chiefly remarkable for their occasional escapes from the constriction of naturalism, less remarkable when facetious in a manner we have not been led to expect from Greene and which we are glad he has pursued no further or when luridly cinematic with that mixture of sensate aversion and autohypnotic pity that deforms his novels. "The Basement Room" and "The End of the Party," two harrowingly concentrated studies of fear, can best stand without qualification; they inscribe, on a more responsible level than any of the others, Greene's compulsive "shorthand of terror." In this collection, as in his novels, the tragic (or rather, pathetic) flaw in Greene's literary character is projected through his most conspicuously mechanical stylistic device, the negative simile. The limits of its usefulness are depressingly exploited: "the coincidences that beset our path like the traps set for leopards in the jungle"; "the [movie] screen flickered like indigestion"; "a pale heartless sun, like a paper streamer, flung by a stranger"; "a hint of religious belief was lodged in his breast like a worm in a nut"; "he carried his body about with him like something he hated"; "The telephone rang, and Miss Manners grasped it like an enemy [sic]." These are verbalized reflexes of the will to misery, induced clichés of despair; they exemplify the morbid *raison d'etre* Greene admitted for himself in *Another Mexico,* (1939), when, recollecting a small, nasty zoo he had once discovered in the corner of a beautiful London park, he wrote:

> One will never exhaust these little storehouses of human cruelty. They are tucked away like gasoline from air-raids, in a street off the Tottenham Court Road, in a London park, at Huichapan . . . they are always there to be drawn on in case of need.

Embodiments of loathing in case of need! Mr. Greene is obviously not in touch unless he is embracing a leper. His investigations are carried on not so much from a center of sympathy as from a need for overcoming the unbearable revulsion. His flights across the threshold of the occult or of the theological are impelled by fear of physical being rather than by visions of the power and the glory. In his world, large-breasted women are always indices of gross and unhappy desire; it does not, therefore, surprise us when, speaking of a map which, like a crystal, he explains, shows different forms to all who look into it, he concludes his fanciful inventory of these forms with the image of "a snake in a lavatory." Predictably, his solicitation for the beleaguered personality creates its own parody: risibility strikes in "A Little Place Off the Edgware Road" where, for a gloomy defective named Craven, "There were moments of happiness in the British Museum reading-room, but the body called him back." One feels that Mr. Greene always undresses in the dark. But he *is* a master story-teller and he compensates for his excesses of piety

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and pity with an unfaltering visualization of the English city scene: twopenny buns, wet mackintoshes, cold chops, smell of hotel stairways, the grinding fact of penury—all the dreary instances that inspired Cocteau's description of London as "that healthy rose-cheeked city with a heart of coal."

Julian Green, like his British namesake, also suffers from rain in the heart. Like Graham's, his characters find little relief from the pressures of their personalities, even among the anxieties of Romanism. Yet Julian Green has acquired detachment sufficiently Gallic to transform his habitual melancholia into fictional visions of Gothic beauty and centripetal force. *If I Were You*, his first novel in many years, remains loyal to the tentative, embittered solitaries of that claustral series of novels he wrote between *Avarice House* and *The Strange River*. Fabian Especel, like the other heroes and heroines, is sexually fearful, mother-bound, wishing something would happen *to* him since nothing happens *in* him. Fabian is an unsuccessful lover, an unloving worker (he is, of course, a clerk) and a wretchedly recreant Catholic. By a satellite of the Devil he is given the bizarre opportunity of inhabiting, under conditions, any other personality he chooses whom he believes more favored by life than he. (With the figurative assumption both Graham Greene and Charles Williams would agree; the wide-open receptivity of a weak soul will attract the negatively fitting destiny: stale despondency in Greene's world, catastrophic diabolism in Williams'). Julian Green, taking no cheap advantages, develops from this plot a plausibly serious, if incidentally ludicrous, consequence. Fabian's metamorphoses are consistently frustrated by the circumstance that as he settles into the adopted personality he is increasingly dominated by the constitutional psychology of the physique he inhabits, getting farther away from the hopes and intentions of his original envelope, so that his excursion through personae turns from flight to a rout as he sheds, successively, a phlegmatic financier with weak kidneys, a healthy murderer, a scholar beset by satyriasis and a handsome man-about-town plagued by a wife and uncle-in-law. The book is wittily disquieting and if its inference—that God knows best which poor vessel your psyche should inhabit—is theologically appeasing (and the orthodox will be satisfied that Fabian can corrupt neither a girl in love nor a small child in state of grace) it is, none the less, a considerably suggestive achievement that restores to the prevailing subject of the dissolving ego an imaginative halo of ingenious fancy.

The late Charles Williams embraced the phantoms of eschatology with an earnestness and compassion that transcends the uncertain inventions of Greene and Green and makes the suppositions of Jean-Paul Sartre in *No Exit* and *The Chips Are Down*, at least in representational impact, rather shallow and not a little cheap. For Williams, Possession, Damnation, Redemption, Life-after-Death and Death-in-Life were, if old-fashioned as terminology, infrangibly

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and vividly eternal as states of the soul. In reviving the concepts of Gnostic as well as of medieval Christianity, he revived with them their symbolic apparatus, and in *All Hallows' Eve* and *Descent Into Hell,* now published for the first time in America, he musters, for the unprepared and certainly astonished reader, the gruesome paraphernalia of black magic and the Lilith legend, echoes of St. Augustine, Milton and the martyrdom of the saints, refurbished for an amberlighted twentieth-century Apocalypse.

Williams' scene was ostensible: in *All Hallows' Eve,* London; in *Descent Into Hell,* a country seat, Battle Hill; counters, merely, for a no-man's land of the quick and the dead, an extra dimension within which souls contend for or against salvation. We have read less than a chapter in *All Hallows' Eve* before we discover that the heroine, waiting in dazed uncertainty on Westminster Bridge, is newly dead in a silent facsimile of London and, before long, we are watching Simon Le Clerc, a multiplex Satan of most unsavory proclivities, making war against the living for their souls and for the souls of those who, though not living, have yet to choose the mode of their "final death." And in *Descent Into Hell,* against the action of an historical pageant, an assortment of characters (very British, indeed, in their flesh) face the agonizing trials leading to salvation or perdition. Such summarizing can do scant justice to the conscientiousness, taste and masculine elegance of Mr. Williams' writing. In the absence of any contemporary touchstone, I find myself inventing the improbability of Henry James, having read James Joyce, deciding to write a Morality in narrative form. If this suggests the varicolored density of Williams' style, it gives no hint of the Spenserian clarity of his images for Evil or his chilling inductions of *horror vacui* in the damned.

There may be a public to whom Williams' demonology is unacceptable because it is felt to be historically exhausted, and it is true that he resuscitated a system of projections belonging to an earlier stage of our cultural references. Actually, however, the terms, if not the costumes, of his morality are in harmony with what we may construe as stages in the life of the psyche. As a matter of fact, the spiritual ordeals of the characters in *Descent Into Hell* are significantly close to the main steps in Jung's Process of Individuation. Pauline Anstruther, meeting herself, is at the first stage of mature individuation, the confrontation of the shadow. Lawrence Wentworth is resisting psychic totality by merging with his anima, his soul-image in its negative, lust-ridden aspect. Pauline's grandmother, Mrs. Anstruther, prepares for the appearance of the Magna Mater (by Jung's interpretation, the truth of nature)—"She was absent, not with the senility of a spirit wandering in feeble memories, but with the attention of a worker engrossed"—and Peter Stanhope, author of the Battle Hill pageant, has reached the fourth stage, that of self-realization, and is thereby enabled to assist with the burdens of others who, like Pauline, know

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the love that casts out fear. Of course, the critic likes thus to translate vision into an intellectual synthesis when the opposite function has already been performed by the artist. It is probably important to observe that Williams' *danse macabre* has a moral veracity demonstrable by reference to orders of interpretation universally reenacted but it is, I would insist, the encarnalizing of his spectral forces, not the didactic parallel extracted from them, that marks his decisive expression. What we can make out of these forces is never so complete as what he put into them. What he put into them was poetry, as the cadences of Wentworth's descent, for brief example, unmistakably give warrant. Here is metaphor obtained by conjunction, unlike Graham Greene's, obtained by bridge.

> A remnant of intelligence cried to him that this was the road of mania, and self-indulgence leading to mania. Self-preservation itself urged him to remain; lucidity urged him, if not love. He stood and looked and listened, as the dead man had looked and listened. He heard faint hurrying footsteps somewhere on the hill; the moon was covered by a cloud. The shadow provoked him; in it they might be, now, passing the end of his road. He must act before it was too late. He would not go to spy; he would go for a walk. He went out of the room, down the soft swift stairs of his mind, into the streets of his mind, to find the phantoms of his mind. He desired hell.

Alex Comfort's hero, Shmul Weinstock, in *On This Side Nothing*, has no visions of heaven or of hell; he would be content with Sartre's epigram, "Hell is other people." Weinstock is trapped in the ghetto of a North African city whence, out of fatigue, not from loyalty or nostalgia, he has returned from Europe to visit his family. When fascist forces commandeer the city and cut off the ghetto from light, water and food, Shmul, with the others, must endure the ensuing thirst, hunger, heat and flies, the daily fear of unimaginable reprisals and the insurgence of sexual appetite. But these are secondary to his quietly obsessive resolution to retain the autonomy of his ego against the imperatives of tribal thinking. The lost souls of Greene, Green and Williams have either withdrawn their projections or identified themselves with them and been consequently invaded by hysteria, damnation or madness. Weinstock experiences no such disassembly. Liberated from the fetishes of clan, nation and religion, his conscience is unassailably in equilibrium. (While they are burying his father, he is engaged with the sad possibility of all our delicate machinery, which has taken many minds and hands so many years to make, annihilated by total war.) He has arrogated to himself an identity of separateness which exists purely by negation.

To Weinstock, being a Jew makes no sense as a racial, theological or dietary unit. The Meat Jews, Law-and-Order Jews, comprise another organization

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within the Citizen-Circus. He refuses escape to Palestine with the comely young Jewess, Rachel, because she is already committed to the aims and content of the hive; child-bearing and housebuilding are in her blood, instincts compromisingly communal. With the world up-ended for destruction, she is still wearing the Citizen-Face. She belongs. Weinstock does not want to belong. The only test for his kind of Jew is that he is "anyone who likes living and who puts up some sort of a fight to stay living," who gets chased and killed continuously, "not merely intermittently in the period when he isn't chasing and killing other people." In short, Weinstock's Jew is the No-sayer, the permanent separatist, the recusant individual man. His is another face of the impounded man dear to Malraux and Koestler but his older, closer prototype is Turgenev's anarchist, Bazarov—Bazarov without aggression. Intellectually aware of the tribal trap that awaits all men of good will, he has set himself the impossible goal of freedom without love. Weinstock finally escapes, seaward, to search, again in Europe or perhaps in America, for "humanity"; human beings, that is to say, rather than Meat-Jews. When the gregarious consciousness has been completely extirpated, it is difficult to imagine an object of dedication outside of oneself except art or God. Weinstock is an unlikely devotee of either, provided by Comfort with nothing but his one-track convictions. At the level of sensory narration, this novel is as blindingly unshaded as the African outpost that contains its action. Comfort's documentary method which, not unlively, should earn one's praise for that concreteness one so often admires in realistic fiction has, eventually, a stupefying effect, as if he were detailing the external world in order to keep his mind off of something more inward and insistent but elusive. *On This Side Nothing* is a critical operation against the Citizen-Face which would sound a deeper value if Comfort's frigid style did not leave Weinstock's individualism with a repellent tone of derelict lovelessness.

*Loveless* is the last and unthinkable word for the quality of feeling that pervades Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*. The essences of this novel are appropriately prefigured in the arresting photograph of Miss Bowen, luminous in shadow, on the book's cover: grace with strength, shrewdness with generosity, warmth without boldness, an appeal irreducibly feminine while predominantly aristocratic. Miss Bowen's Stella Rodney, suffering "the demolition of the moment" in London of the late war, is—no mistaking the twin—a mirror of these qualities. I think she would appreciate Weinstock's integrity without condoning his apostasy and, with no assistance from Fabian Especel's devil, would also understand the mystery of the alien-inhabited body. The circumstantial subject of Miss Bowen's novel is the dilemma of Mrs. Rodney, exposed between a love dedicated to the destruction of her environment and a love that would save her environment by violating her personality. Her

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good and bad angels are strangely pledged to ideals unsynchronized with their promises or their aspects. She must reconcile herself to the suspicion that Robert Kelway, her lover, tall, candescent, "moody, hardy and lyrical," is a traitor to her country, a reconciliation made uglier since it is proposed by Harrison, a dark, neutral, shifty sort of man whose momentary expressions of candor are subordinated to "a quite other curious trait . . . one of his eyes either was or behaved as being just perceptibly higher than the other. This lag or inequality in his vision gave one the feeling of being looked at twice—being viewed then checked over again in the same moment."

Stella Rodney, living in a furnished flat, is to Louie, the factory girl living in a furnished soul, the reflected glory of her own desire for standards of identity. Harrison, the binocular and unloved, intersects their separate needs. Miss Bowen has here created a subtle corollary to the question of loyalties. Young Louie could, if encouraged, love Harrison, but Harrison can only love (in his limited sense of it) where he can destroy, and the similarity of his predicament to Kelway's is made clear, I think, by the belated disclosure of Harrison's first name. Further elements of Miss Bowen's design would no doubt shape themselves in a second reading but I am not sure that a generous ambiguity is not a purposeful part of her meaning.

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I understand that Miss Bowen's prose in this novel has run up against resistance in anti-elliptical quarters. To my sense, it has an interesting indirection which is yet not too indirect for focusing on the immediacy of conversations enriched by the accurate idioms of class or on the properties of Miss Bowen's most protected devotion: the reflection of persons in their things, the intimate appointments of a street, a house, a room, the objects in a room.

> Harrison sat planted well forward in his armchair—which, like so many armchairs in a room in which normally only two intimate people sit, was a stranded outpost some way away down the carpet, and was turned towards hers (which faced towards Robert's, empty) at a tentative angle which he had not changed.

In context, this is specification and plot, the gesture of relatedness made by the inanimate. In Miss Bowen's city of death, life is guarded in whatever of life remains. Her feeling for this suspension between existence and oblivion is quite as keen as that of Charles Williams. His statement of "the invisible life . . . quickening its pressure upon mental awareness" is echoed by her presentiment that

> These unknown dead reproached those left living, not by their death, which might any night be shared, but by their unknownness, which could not be mended now. . . . The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned.

For those of us who did not dwell in the toppling cities of Helltime Europe, the community of the quick and the dead must remain more impalpable than real. That this was a nucleating experience for the European literary mind we need have no doubt if we had read only its results in the work of Charles Williams and Elizabeth Bowen. Their novels, each in its own mode, reshape the ambits of our sympathy and support, at the same time, that necessary and, we hope, undying affection for our English language which they, themselves, have used without fear of its splendor or mistrust of its fine allusiveness.

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## *A Communication*

SIRS:

I greatly enjoyed the Spring issue, and most particularly the notes on *Doctor Faustus* by Joseph Frank. Kindly give Mr. Frank my best thanks for his penetrating occupation with my work.

Please tell him also that I am to blame for the omission of three pages in the translation and not the translator. I made several small cuts in the foreign-language editions of the novel, chiefly of music-theoretical passages, in order to facilitate the enormously difficult task of the various translators.

Mr. Frank assumes that the figure of the poet Daniel zur Hoehe is a caricature-portrait of Stefan George. That is not so. It is true that the figure was chiefly drawn after a live model, which, however, was only a pupil and disciple of Stefan George by the name of Derleth. By the way, the very same character already figures in an early short story of mine entitled "At the Prophet's" (*Stories of Three Decades*).

*Pacific Palisades, California.* THOMAS MANN.

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